

You Feel It Too by Maiasaura

Series: [You Feel It Too Universe \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Multi

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Characters, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler & Nancy Wheeler, THE PARTY ARE WONDERFUL FRIENDS

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-05

Updated: 2018-11-11

Packaged: 2022-04-23 03:00:13

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 45

Words: 283,987

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Mike and Eleven were more alike than they knew. Mike had been broken for years, and Eleven broken her whole life. The events of November, 1983 only fully destroyed them both, and a year apart then further drove the wedge.

This is the story of Mike and Eleven, who they were before, who they became, and how together they put bandages on their wounds.

(Starts off going over how Mike & Eleven felt during seasons 1 & 2 and then transitions into a post-season-2 fic.)

1. Trapped in the House

Author's Note:

I have no idea what I'm doing - this will be mostly in present tense (after the first two chapters) and entirely in second person POV so I apologize for any weird syntax. I usually write in first person POV and entirely past tense so this is a learning curve.

It's also a plot bunny that's gotten wildly out of hand but we'll see where it goes.

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Suicidal thoughts & Suicide attempt

PART ONE

NOVEMBER 12 1983

MIKE WHEELER

You wished you could say you were unfamiliar with this feeling.

But, the fact of the matter is, you aren't.

The truth is, the first time you felt this way was when you were ten. Nancy had stopped hanging out with you and your friends, and you really didn't understand why, no matter how many times she told you.

"I'm about to go to *High School*, Mike!" Nancy whined, when you begged her to come play with them for the millionth time.

"Yeah? So?" you responded, your heart in your throat, your mind a blank slate of confusion.

"So, that means I don't want to play with *ten year old boys*. Ugh!" Nancy shouted, slamming the door in your face.

Nancy had been your partner in crime for your whole lives, even though she was four years older than you. You remembered when the two of you would play with action figures together, and she'd include her dolls in the fun, and it was silly but it was still great. And you remembered the two of you pulling pranks on your parents, or Nancy joining you and your friends for board games. You remembered feeling like you had an ally in a house that consisted of a mother and a father who didn't really love each other – of a father who was never there, and a mother who didn't have boundaries.

But that didn't matter to her, anymore, apparently.

What mattered to her now was looking pretty, wearing make up, impressing boys so that they would – gross – *kiss*.

And it made you feel empty inside.

You were mad, of course, but mostly you were just sad. The kind of deep, bone-crushing sad no ten year old should ever feel. Of course, you were already a prime candidate for that sadness. You had been bullied relatively consistently, ever since you were five.

But usually you could keep your chin up.

You had your friends, after all.

And your sister.

So, you felt that sadness, when you were ten – like sadness you had felt before, when you had been pushed on the playground, picked last (or close to it) in Gym, made fun of for knowing one too many things in science class – but deeper. Deeper than before. It took over your chest and it hollowed it out. Your thoughts were tight, a spiral, a spiral of wondering where, exactly, you'd gone wrong.

Rather than take it out on yourself, though, you got mad at Nancy. She started the fissure in your friendship, but you broke it apart completely.

It was easier than acknowledging what you actually felt.

You'd get pains of that deep sadness every once in a while. When

girls laughed at you for being nerdy. When Troy pushed you, and beat you – or worse, your friends – up. When Dad refused to really talk to you. When Mom didn't know what you were doing in your life.

But you'd swallow it and move on.

The next time you really felt like this – *really* felt like this – had only been a few days ago, on Monday, when you didn't know where Will was, and you were worried that you never would be able to find him again, and he was one of your *best friends*, and you cared about him *so much* that it hurt, it hurt to not know where Will was –

At least you could help look for him –

And you found Eleven instead, and even though she was weird, and quiet, you understood her. She understood you. And understanding each other made the feeling... not go away, exactly. But ebb. Helping her hide gave you a feeling of control that you just. Hadn't had. Since Will was lost.

And then you thought Will was dead, and you were mad at El, and the feeling came back in full. Touching every cell, every corner of your body, until it wasn't as though you were *you* anymore, it was as though you *were* that... it wasn't sadness. It was emptiness. You were that emptiness.

El showed you he was alive, though, and you got hope back, and you weren't mad at her anymore, and that made you feel better, and she was nice to talk to, and she just... she didn't have to say anything, really. You could see in her eyes that she knew your sadness herself. That she *understood* that sadness. The two of you looked at each other, and you finally found someone else that understood what you were feeling. That you were feeling that sadness in every damn corner of your small on-the-cusp-of-pubescence body. And she felt it too.

Lucas would say you had a crush on her because she was the first girl who didn't look at you and go "gross," but that wasn't it.

That wasn't it at all.

But Lucas wouldn't understand that. Yes, he had his own struggles. But they weren't the same as yours.

And, of course, Lucas' lack of trust of the new girl – and why would he, really; you *knew* he had earned his distrust of others – would be made even *worse* because she didn't want you all to find Will.

And so they'd fight, and she'd run away, and you'd lose Lucas, and lose all hope of finding Will –

Three of the most important people in your life, gone.

And who even *knew* where Nancy had gone.

So it was just you and Dustin, and Dustin was getting threatened with a knife, and God (if such a concept existed) only knew what Troy would end up doing to Dustin, and you just *couldn't let that happen*. You had already lost everyone else.

And the emptiness had crept into every single corner of your soul and body and mind, and you didn't really know who you were anymore, except for that sadness. You only knew that it was better to die inside of a vast quarry lake than to let that happen to Dustin.

Afterwards, you'd say that you just didn't know what else to do.

That you just wanted to make sure Dustin would be okay.

That you couldn't stand to see Dustin hurt.

And yeah, that was definitely a part of it.

But also?

It was hard to admit.

But you weren't sure you wanted to be alive anymore.

And you were, scarily, okay with the idea of death.

After all, your friend had been taken by a mysterious force – and no one could figure out what it was. And your friend's disappearance

was *probably* covered up rather than actually attempted to be solved.

Then your new friend was gone, and fending for herself, and she'd been locked up by bad men, and couldn't feel safe, even though she was only *twelve*, and she was good, and she felt the same sadness that you felt, and no one should feel that sadness. Not you, not her, not anyone.

And then your other friend left, because he didn't trust her – which wasn't fair to her – but life wasn't fair to him, either, and you didn't want *either* of them out of the party, and there wasn't really an answer, and you felt trapped –

And maybe, just maybe, it was better to die than to live in this world that wasn't clear, wasn't obvious, wasn't like Dungeons and Dragons –

Messy, complicated, hard, *wrong*.

That's what this world was.

Maybe it was better for you to die than keep going.

But then El saved you, and you were okay, and the party reunited.

You were okay with dying, still, of course, but with El around at least you'd rather *not*, rather than wishing you had control over this *one thing*. When, where, and why you'd die. I mean, you still wanted control over that one thing, but –

At least you weren't wishing for it.

At least for now you weren't wishing for it.

El was back, and you were looking up into her eyes, and she had *saved* you, and maybe life would still be okay, as long as there was this girl who looked at you and you could recognize yourself in her –

Someone who wanted to protect the people they cared about.

Someone who needed to pretend that they didn't feel lost.

Someone who needed to feel some semblance of control.

Even if it was for a second.

Pretty sick ways of trying to get control – between trying to *die* and breaking the arm of some creep – but, then again.

Who would expect twelve year olds to know better?

And she was on the ground, and passed out, and you ran to her, because you needed her to be safe -

“El are you okay? El?” you shouted, because you needed her to be, because you had just gotten that hope back – and she opened her eyes, and you breathed with relief, but she was crying, sobbing even –

“Mike... I’m sorry...”

“Sorry? What are you sorry for?” you breathed, because you didn’t know what on *Earth* she could be apologizing for right at this second.

“The gate... I opened it... I’m the monster...”

Blood was trickling down her nostrils – both of them – and she couldn’t stop crying – but you honestly didn’t care.

Perhaps you should have seen that coming, that she was the reason the gate opened. After all, how many other people in Hawkins could plausibly connect the town to a whole other dimension?

But, if she hadn’t, you never would have met her.

The girl just as lost as you were.

“No,” you said, as earnestly as you could, hoping to make her understand.

“No, El, you’re not the monster. You saved me.”

Hopefully she knows exactly *how much* she saved you.

That it wasn’t just your life she saved – or, at least, your immediate

life, right at that second.

But also your direction, your stability, your clarity as the world around you turned and turned and your parents were terrible and your town was small and the bullies racist and cruel and everything didn't make any sense at all but she gave you back something similar to sense –

“Do you understand?” you begged, looking at her with the biggest smile you'd had on your face in a long time.

“You saved me.”

She held back another sob, and you pulled her up into a hug.

Because she did, she saved you.

And everything felt so, so okay.

So *okay*.

And, for a few hours, you could see a future. With a person who you understood, and who understood you.

The stakes were high, too, which helped distract from your brief foray into the darkest corner of your emotions.

Running from the Bad Men –

Eleven tipping over a van –

Trying to get Will from the Upside Down –

Sensory Deprivation Tanks and tons and tons of salt –

Nancy, even, joining forces with you again. No more secrets. Maybe you'd crossed the divide to where you could be partners in crime again.

Sitting with El, in the gym, waiting for everything to be over... waiting for it to be safe... to have your whole party back together again...

The party changed, of course. There was you, and Lucas, and Dustin, and Will, and El –

But, in a weird way, there was also Nancy, and Jonathan, and the Chief, and Mrs. Byers.

In a weird way, you were all the party now.

The party against the Demogorgon, and the Upside-Down.

“El?” you asked, looking at her as you both sat together.

“Yeah?” she whispered.

“What... why did you open the gate?”

El looked at you for a long time, not afraid or angry, but her face twisted in concentration. She was looking for the right words.

“They wanted me to... find... men. With big,” she gestured to her head, “hats. Bad men, they called them,” El whispered.

You looked at her in confusion, trying to understand.

“Russians?”

“Yes....”

“And... that made you open the gate?”

“I found ... the Monster... instead...”

“The Demogorgon?”

She nodded at you, looking at you desperately with tears in her eyes. You pull her into a hug again.

“It’s not your fault, El. So you were scared and opened the gate. It’s fine,” you nodded back at her, smiling, “Really.”

You couldn’t even imagine what that was like.

To not have control over any aspect of your life.

To have powers that you didn't understand in a world you weren't permitted to even attempt to understand.

To have them used by the people who poked and prodded you –

If you kept thinking about it you'd get to angry.

You forced yourself to stop.

She was smiling weakly, but clearly tired, and not wanting to think about that much anymore. She also needed food, clearly.

Well, you wouldn't let her go back to that horrible place anymore. Not anymore.

"MIKE! I FOUND THE CHOCOLATE PUDDING!" Dustin screamed in the distance.

"OKAY," you responded, angrily almost, because they were interrupting you talking to El.

"Are you feeling any better?"

El shrugged, looking away from you again, before looking back up with a frown.

"What's... put... ting?"

You laughed, because you couldn't help it, because her lack of understanding of the world would always be cute –

Cute?

Not actually a surprise...

You really needed to stop being surprised that you found her pretty, or cute. Because at this point it was just *obvious*.

"It's this chocolate goo you eat with a spoon," you explained, realizing as you said it how unappetizing it sounded.

"Don't worry... when all this is over you won't have to keep eating junk food and left overs like a dog anymore," suddenly your hopes

were tumbling out of your mouth before you could stop them, before you could stop yourself from sounding like an idiot, before you could control yourself – after all, you were all going to stop the bad men from taking her away. Why *wouldn't* this happen?

“My mom, she’s a pretty awesome cook,” you said.

Only really redeemable mom-thing about her.

“She can make you whatever you like!”

El looked at you hopefully, “Eggos?”

Eggos?

I mean, you knew that she liked them, but why Eggos when she could have spaghetti, or pizza, or chicken?

“Well, yeah, Eggos, but real food, too,” you responded in confusion.

You sighed, your heart going a million miles a minute, El watching you and frowning as you sat there and squirmed a little in your confusion.

“See, I was thinking... once all this is over and Will’s back and you’re not a secret anymore... my parents can get you an actual bed for the basement! Or you can take my room if you want, since I’m down there all the time anyways,” you explained.

You knew it was probably not okay to offer your room to her, but on the other hand, it made you feel less empty to be so important in another person’s life. Offering all you had was the only way you knew how to be worthwhile.

“My point is... they’ll take care of you! They’ll be like your new parents. And Nancy... she’ll be like your new sister,” you said, as excitedly as you could, because it *was* exciting, to have El with you all the time, the two of you sitting in silence and just... understanding.

“Will you be like my brother?” El asked curiously, looking at you with that expression you liked the best on her face – that one of

curiosity and happiness combined. It was so rare to see.

“What? No... No!” you responded. You didn’t know what this feeling in your chest was. You didn’t like it. It wasn’t emptiness, exactly, but it was reminiscent of it. Dread, perhaps? Perhaps it was dread. You didn’t want such a thing at all.

But now she looked hurt, and you felt awful as she asked, “Why no?”

You had to explain...

“Because... cause it’s different.”

“Why?”

Of course that wasn’t good enough for her.

It shouldn’t have been, obviously.

But now your heart was in your throat and you didn’t know really how to talk anymore and you didn’t know if you were ready to say this yet because she was new to the world and she had been through so much and it wasn’t good for her really to be put on the spot like this but you didn’t know that and you didn’t want her to say she didn’t feel the same about you and if she felt the same about you then that would hurt you but you’d probably be fine probably maybe you didn’t know anymore you had so much riding on this you knew that you should probably just backpeddle and try to get out of this because this was absolutely the stupidest conversation you had ever managed to dig yourself into –

“I mean. I dunno. I guess it’s not. It’s stupid.”

You were stupid.

You were the stupidest person alive.

She was fresh, she was new, and it was absolutely not the time to try to explain to her what liking someone meant –

Oh God –

You liked her –

You had actually admitted it to yourself –

Well fuck –

“Mike?”

You looked up at her, your heart pounding loudly in your chest, as fast as when you were running in Gym class.

“Yeah?”

“Friends don’t lie,” she told you, earnestly, her face etched with the kindness only someone who had felt like you had could have. You swallowed heavily, looking at her with fear, but you would try to explain, because she had *asked* you to explain, after all.

“Well... “

Your head was spinning

Your heart was pounding

Your skin was sweating

Oh God

Oh God

Oh God

Oh God

“I was thinking... I don’t know... Maybe we can go to the Snow Ball... together.”

“Snow Ball?”

Of course she didn’t know what that was.

“It’s this cheesy school dance, where you go in the gym and dance to music and stuff. I’ve never been, but I know you’re not supposed to

go with your *sister*,” you almost gagged at the very thought.

You were glad Nancy was back in your life, but *eww*.

“No?”

She was cute all the time, but you couldn’t help but enjoy the look on her face when she didn’t understand something about the world that usually went unsaid.

“I mean... you can, but it’d be really weird. You go to school dances with someone that... you know... someone that you like.”

There. You said it.

It was out in the world now.

No taking it back.

“A friend?”

Oh El.

“Not a friend. Um... uh...”

Oh god, your heart was pounding even more now.

“Uh... someone like...”

How were you even supposed to *explain* something like this? How was that supposed to go? How would one explain liking someone to someone who didn’t know what... anything... was??

You didn’t know how to explain.

And your heart was going too fast anyway.

What was there to lose?

You leaned in as fast as you could and did what you wanted to do since... well... since you hung out all day at your house, really.

You kissed her.

And her lips were soft and your heart was in your throat and your stomach was making swooping feelings and your fingers were tingling and you couldn't imagine kissing literally anyone else.

And you pulled back from her and she looked at you with those big eyes and your heart was still in your throat because *what was she going to say* –

And she was smiling, and that was more than anything, really. That was more than any words. And you were so overwhelmed with happiness that you couldn't help but look away, even for a little bit.

But then there was a car in the driveway, and you left in a panic, and everything fell to literally shit.

Now you couldn't think about the feelings in your chest or your cells or your brain because now you were caught up literally in hell –

The cars were there, and they had the school surrounded, and you had to warn your friends, and none of you were safe, none of you none of you none of you none of you –

[illegible]

Save El

Save El

Save El

Save El –

Trapped –

They were there –

But El was –

Blood was coming out of their *eyes* – dripping down –

Down –

Down –

Down –

And then they were down

And then El was down

And you leaned down to her, and you begged her to be okay, because everything was adrenaline exploding in your veins, and she *wouldn't wake up* –

“No, no, no, she won't wake up. El!” you shouted, and you couldn't feel anything anymore –

“El!”

“El!”

You checked her breathing, and you could barely feel it, and you all had to get out of there, and someone had to carry her –

El –

El –

El –

And the man was there, the Bad Man, you didn't know but you *knew*, in your *chest*, that this was the man who had hurt El so, so much, and you just want to kill him – kill him –

Grab his throat and –

Choke him –

And instead of getting at him, you were taken instead, and you were grabbed by men, and they were going to take away El, and you couldn't escape, and it felt like your chest was compressing in on itself because they were going to take her away and they were going to keep hurting her for the rest of her life until she literally *died* because they cared more about fighting stupid *Russians* than actually fucking letting her be a human fucking being –

The man was picking El up from the ground, and you were trapped with your friends, and everything was falling apart –

Everything –

And hearing him call her Eleven just made your blood boil, made you realize how *inhuman* it was, made you realize you would never call her Eleven ever again, she would always be El, or any other name, but a *name*, not a number, not a number that bad bad man called her –

Escape, escape, escape and save her, escape – you just wanted to escape – and you couldn't –

And she reached for you – calling your name –

And your heart yearned so hard –

And everything hurt so bad –

And the lights started to flicker –

Blood

It was coming

The Demogorgon was coming –

It was –

The wall was opening –

And it was there –

And the bad men were shooting at it, and Dustin was carrying El, and you were all running away –

Well. At least the bad man was gone now.

At least the Monster had gotten him.

And you ran, and guns were shooting and everything was flickering and you couldn't think anymore and everything was just too much for you or for her or for your friends and you just couldn't think you only could try and survive even though it was pointless with that *thing* in the building and you ran into the science lab and you helped to set her down on a table and you just needed her to hold on because you needed her to live and *she* needed to live –

“Just hold on a little longer, okay?” you begged, looking at her and trying so so so hard to not cry, even though you all were probably going to die.

You *had* made your peace with death.

But now that peace had been stolen away.

“He’s gone,” you said, you reassured as much as you could, “The bad man’s gone.”

“We’ll be home soon, and my mom...” “

She was smiling at you.

“She’ll get you your own bed... You can eat as many Eggos as you want...”

She was still smiling, and for a minute you could pretend that it *will* be like this, like your dream could be a reality –

“And... we can go to the Snow Ball...” you said in barely more than a whisper, for fear of hoping too hard.

“Promise?” she asked, crying still, and your heart lodged in your throat again.

“Promise.”

And you meant it.

You meant it more than you had ever meant anything before in your life.

And for a brief minute, again, it was just you and her.

And then the screaming and the guns came back to you all. And you were trapped in that room, with no escape, and you didn’t want to watch her die, you didn’t think you could bear it –

And the Demogorgon was inside –

And Lucas was trying to shoot at it, and you couldn’t think of anything except keeping your friends – all three of them – safe –

They had to survive –

It didn’t really matter if you did or not –

And the Demogorgon was being shot backwards into the wall, and you didn’t know how because Lucas couldn’t have killed it with his slingshot – but then Eleven was up –

No

No!

“Eleven, stop –“

You said it before you could stop yourself –

And she threw you backwards, so you were powerless. You could only watch her approach the monster, and you could only sit there and cry, because you knew what would come next –

And so did she –

“Goodbye Mike,” she whispered.

You felt the emptiness invade every cell of your body again –

Tighten around every part of you –

Suffocate you –

She was going –

She was going to save you –

You couldn’t get the words out, but if you could have, you would have said no, El

No

Let *me* save *you*

But she didn’t

She didn’t let you

“No more,” she hissed at the monster, and she put her hand up, and she was sending it back into the Upside down, and she was shouting at it as it shouted at her, and Dustin and Lucas were in pain, and so were you, and you watched as everything in front of you turned to dust, and you couldn’t stop crying as you watched El save you for what felt like the millionth time –

And it was over –

And you were empty again –

Probably permanently.

She had to come back. She had to –

You got up and screamed for her, screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed, but she was gone –

Gone –

Gone –

Gone –

Gone.

And so were you.

In every way that mattered.

And now, you sit here, talking to these people, who look at you like a child, who treat you like someone you're not. And you stare at them, and you try to make them go away, but you're not El. You can't do that with your mind. Not really.

El is dead. And you are lost too.

"I don't know where she is. And even if I did, I'd never tell you. I would never tell you," you say, and they try to lie to you, and you feel like the weight crushing in on you could suffocate you –

And then you look up. And you see her in the window.

And she's crying. And you could cry, if you weren't being watched.

And she runs away, and the people go after her.

You know she's alive, for now.

But she probably won't be for long.

And even if she is...

You know you'll never see her again.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hope you all enjoyed that. Poor Mike, you'll see her again.

I know I need to work on Changes Everything (my Harry Potter fic) but I've had bad writer's block for it for nearly a year. I'm currently working on an original novel for NaNoWriMo in addition to this and got inspired by the Mileven scenes in season 2 so I had to write this. I'm hoping getting back into the groove with this and NaNo will help with CE, but we'll see.

Please comment & leave kudos because honestly feedback is what I require for writing more than anything. Thanks!

I have tumblrs if you want to talk to me more:
Ornithoscelida, or A-Kulindadromeus-In-A-Trenchcoat

2. Trapped in the Woods

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for implied childhood sexual abuse
in this chapter & suicidal thoughts

N O V E M B E R 1 2 1 9 8 3

J A N E I V E S

You hide under a tree.

You hide under a tree, and you don't know what else to do.

You don't know much of anything, really.

But right now you especially don't know what else to do.

You stare out in front of you, looking at everything around you.
Trees, logs, a river winding before you.

You barely breathe, your heart pounding in your ears, as you hear
the Bad Men search the woods around you. Looking for you.

Wanting to take you back to *that place*.

The place that had been your home until just a week ago.

You breathe in sharply. Your lungs burn with pain. You try not to
cry.

You are scared. So, so, so scared.

You shiver against the dirt and bury your face in your knees.

Too much

Too much

This has all been too much

You sit there and you think, you cry softly, you wonder where it all went wrong.

Terror floods every single corner of your body, from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet, extending through every finger, every toe, every inch.

Your heart is pounding. Your palms are sweating, even though it's so *cold*.

You cry more, as silently as you can, and you hold yourself together as tightly as you can.

As you sit there, you look around and listen. The footsteps and the voices of the Bad Men grow farther and farther and farther away.

You breathe with relief, but now a new feeling sets in.

You're still terrified, because you're alone, and in the woods, and the woods are huge and crowded and yet empty at the same time.

And you can never go back to Mike because Mike would die if you did. They would all die.

All of them.

And you couldn't let that happen.

Not Mike, who would look at you *like that*, and explain things so *calmly*.

Who made your heart pound in a good way.

Who made your palms sweat – but in a good way.

Who made you want to use your powers to protect him.

Who made you feel like someone was looking out for you.

Unlike Papa.

You shiver and fold in on yourself.

Papa.

Papa trying to take you away from Mike and your friends.

You had looked at him. You had watched him, and he had watched you, and he was trying to fill your head with empty promises again. And you felt that tug on your heart –

That tug that said it would just –

Just be –

So much easier –

To –

To –

To trust him.

To believe what he said.

But you couldn't anymore.

Mike had showed you what it meant to actually care about someone.

Dustin had showed you what it meant to actually admire someone.

Lucas had showed you that it was not only okay, but sometimes *good* to mistrust others.

Mrs. Byers had showed you what a *good* parent was like.

And now you wouldn't trust Papa anymore.

No matter how hard it was.

Friends don't lie.

Parents don't hurt you.

“Bad.”

He was bad.

Papa was *bad*.

And you wouldn't let him in anymore. You wouldn't let him *hurt* you anymore.

You remembered being forced to try and kill a cat. And how much it hurt.

How much you knew you'd hate yourself if you did it.

How much you didn't want to hurt the small fluffy animal.

And they took you.

And they dragged you.

And they tried to stuff you into that bad room again.

And you shut down. Every bit of you just. Shut. Down.

Being in that room meant shutting down.

Meant breaking down.

Meant losing a bit of yourself.

Not that you had a self to begin with.

And you couldn't handle that happening again, so you killed them all. And Papa *praised* you.

And you felt hollow. You felt as though you'd been hollowed out, like the coke can. Someone had dug inside of you and ripped you out, until you weren't a *person* anymore.

You were a weapon.

A weapon to find the men in the fuzzy hats and help them get killed.

That's what you needed to do.

That's all you were good for.

All anyone wanted you for.

You take a deep, sharp breath and try to stop crying. You're hiding in the woods.

You needed to stay safe.

People wanted you for other reasons, too.

They just couldn't have you around without the Bad Men finding you.

And you couldn't bear the idea of them getting hurt, even a little bit.

You remembered the cafeteria with Mike.

You remembered how happy he looked as you sat there together, talking quietly while waiting for... whatever happened next.

You'd done it. You found Will. Yeah, you were the reason that he was in the Upside Down in the first place – but –

But you weren't the monster.

You weren't a weapon.

You were a person, and you had helped to find him again.

"Don't worry," he was saying, and you looked up at him in confusion.

"When this is over you won't have to keep eating junk food and left overs like a dog anymore," he was talking very very fast, and each word sort of tumbled out of his mouth like water from the tap, and you watched him, waiting to hear what he would say.

"My mom, she's a pretty awesome cook," he said, 'She can make you whatever you like?"

You liked Eggos.

"Eggos?"

“Well, yeah, Eggos, but real food, too,” he said. You looked at him and frowned. What would be better than *Eggos*?

“See, I was thinking... once all this is over and Will’s back and you’re not a secret anymore... my parents can get you an actual bed for the basement! Or you can take my room if you want, since I’m down there all the time anyways,” Mike said excitedly.

You looked at him and you couldn’t help but smile.

It was nice to have someone want to help you.

And *really* help you.

Not just pin you down –

Screaming –

Holding you forcefully while shaving off your hair –

Even though you *wanted your hair* –

Or

Feeding you gross, mushy food, food you didn’t want, forcing you to eat it, holding back your head and forcing it down your throat until finally you just ate it so that it would be over quicker –

Or –

Or –

You couldn’t think of it, as you sat there under the log and stared out into the night.

You couldn’t think of the other things they did to you.

Not now.

Possibly not ever.

“My point is... they’ll take care of you! They’ll be like your new parents. And Nancy... she’ll be like your new sister,” he had said

happily. You smiled back at him.

“Will you be like my brother?” you asked. You had always wanted a brother. It felt weird, though, to think of Mike like a brother.

“What? No... No!” Mike said quickly. He didn’t look happy about the thought at all.

“Why no?” you whispered.

Why wouldn’t he want to be your brother?

“Because... cause it’s different.”

Different?

“Why?”

He looked nervous as he stared at you. The two of you watched each other for a moment as he tried to find words.

“I mean. I dunno. I guess it’s not. It’s stupid.”

Well now this was just stupid.

He was keeping something from you, and it was stupid.

“Mike?”

He looked at you again, and he looked nervous still, and this was so, so stupid

“Yeah?”

“Friends don’t lie,” you stated, looking at him as seriously as you could. You didn’t want him to start lying. You wanted everything to stay just as it was.

“Well...”

He looked so nervous. You were so confused.

“I was thinking... I don’t know... Maybe we can go to the Snow

Ball... together.”

“Snow Ball?” you asked, because you really didn’t know what that was. Sometimes he forgot that you didn’t know much of anything, really.

“It’s this cheese school dance, where you go in the gym and dance to music and stuff. I’ve never been, but I know you’re not supposed to go with your *sister*,” he said very quickly. You looked at him in more confusion.

You knew what dancing was, but why weren’t you supposed to do it with your sister?

“No?” you asked, because you needed more information. You needed to know what Mike was keeping from you.

You didn’t want him to keep anything from you.

“I mean... you can, but it’d be really weird. You go to school dances with someone that... you know... someone that you like,” Mike said.

You liked Mike, and Mike liked you. This wasn’t something to hide?

“A friend?” you continued, assuming that’s what he meant, because what else could he be talking about?

“Not a friend,” he stammered, “Um... uh...”

What? You could like someone differently than friend-like?

What was Mike even *talking* about?

“Uh... someone like...”

He looked at you for a while, his lips open as though he were going to say something more, but no words came out. You watched him in confusion, wishing to know what he was going to say.

Suddenly he was coming towards you as fast as he could, really, and suddenly you felt his lips on yours.

Your heart leapt up into your throat and it pounded so loudly you couldn't hear anything else and your stomach felt as light as a feather and you felt weak in the knees and your head was spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning –

And then he was gone, looking at you so scared, so frightened, but you couldn't help it, you smiled, because that had felt so nice, and so safe, and so perfect, and you didn't know you had wanted that, really, but you did –

You were still confused, of course. What did liking someone in a kissing way mean? What did it mean to like Mike in a way that meant you wanted to kiss him more?

But then there was a car pulling up, and he was gone before he could explain anything more –

And there was shouting, and there was put-ting in front of you that Dustin and Lucas had grabbed, and then there was more shouting, and –

Shouting –

Running –

Escape the Bad Men

No No No No No you couldn't go back

You couldn't go back

You couldn't

Go

Back

YOU

COULDN'T

GO

BACK

You were surrounded by that Woman

And the Bad Men

And they were going to hurt your friends

And you weren't going to let that happen

And you concentrated –

Focused –

Your head was burning –

Your eyes were stinging –

You could feel blood trickle out of your nose –

But you know what they deserved?

To have blood pour from their eyes and nose and everywhere else

And those bad people were frozen in place

And blood was pouring from them

And you were filled with a hot, bubbly feeling in your stomach

A hot bubbly feeling that was setting every inch of you on fire

But it was a good fire

A *great* fire

And then, finally, you could feel the strings inside all of them break

And they all collapsed

But your head was POUNDING

And now you were aware of it

And it hurt

It hurt

It hurt

IT HURT

IT HURT

IT HURT

IT HURT –

You had collapsed on the ground, and you had blacked out from the pain –

Everything gone again –

And when you opened your eyes, you were staring into Papa's, and he was holding your head and was much much much too close to you again, and you could feel panic enter you –

“Bad,” you said to him, because you couldn't get any more words to come out of your mouth (not that you could usually)

Mike

Mike was good

Mike was safe

“Mike –“ you said, over and over, trying to get to him, but the bad men had him –

Lights, flickering

Everything, flickering

The Monster was coming

But honestly, those bad men were going to keep trying to find you.

Keep looking for you.

Keep finding you.

And eventually they were going to kill the people you liked.

Wouldn't it just be better for you to be gone?

"He's gone," Mike said, breaking into your thoughts, "The bad man's gone. We'll be home soon, and my mom..."

Well, if Papa was gone, maybe... maybe...

No, they'd always be looking for you. Someone would always be looking for you.

It was more than just Papa.

But you couldn't stop your smile, because it was nice to pretend, even for a second, that everything could possibly be okay, and you could be with Mike, and you could keep each other safe, because that's what you *did* –

"She'll get you your own bed... You can eat as many Eggos as you want..."

You smiled more, and you tried to pretend that was true, like you *weren't* all going to die, that even if you all lived, you would escape the Bad Men without killing the people you liked –

"And... we can go to the Snow Ball..." Mike whispered. And now you were both crying together.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

And you looked at each other, and all of the screaming – all of the guns – all of the explosions – melted away.

They were gone.

It was just you and Mike.

And you felt like the pain burning through each corner of your body, or the weight that seemed to be constantly crushing your chest, was gone.

And then the screaming started again.

And the guns started again.

And everything shattered again.

And the Demogorgon was coming, and Mike had turned away from you, and Mike and Lucas and Dustin were trying to save *you*

You

The person who had caused this whole mess

No

No

They didn't deserve this

They needed to live

If anyone should die here

It was you

You pulled yourself up

You pulled yourself together

Even though everything still hurt and still spun

And you walked forward and shot back the Demogorgon

And you moved past the kids

And Mike was trying to stop you, because of course he was

And you pushed him back because he couldn't die

Mike couldn't die

It was you who had to die

It was you who *deserved* to die

Because you had hurt him, hurt Will, hurt Barb, hurt so many others

You were dangerous

And it was time to fix it

You turned around to look at Mike, and he was looking at you and crying, and your heart shattered –

But every inch of you was already ice, and you couldn't really do anything about it anyway, and you knew that you had ruined everything for everyone, and you couldn't really live with yourself if you didn't *try* –

“Goodbye Mike,” you whispered

Ice was enveloping you

That weight was crushing your chest again

Mike was crying and he didn't want you to go

And you didn't want to go either, really

But you couldn't *not* go

You *had* to do this –

You looked up at the monster, and it terrified every corner of your being, but you had to look up at it, and you watched it, and you finally managed to hiss at it, and you put your hand up, and you concentrated every inch of you –

Your body was still ice and compression and lost but you also were now on fire

Fire and Ice

And you were exploding

And your brain was screaming

It hurt

It hurt

It hurt

It hurt

And you screamed because you already were screaming on the inside,
and the Monster screamed, and everyone Screamed, and you were
going to send it

Back

Back

Back into that horrible place

And everything disappeared

And you woke up in the place

And you were now frozen inside and out

And you sat up, and you looked around, and your heart was
pounding

You had *thought* that that would kill you

But now you were just alone, and probably trapped

And so you walked down the hallways and you looked for an escape

And you thought about everything that had happened.

You thought about escaping from the lab after you'd opened the
Gate.

You thought about how scared you had been, because you had seen that Monster, and you knew where you went when you were exploring with your mind, now –

So dark

So cold

So *empty*

But it wasn't empty at all

And every inch of your body was just composed of fear

And you opened the Gate and you escaped and you knew, because as you opened the gate you saw the Monster take him –

Take Will

And you didn't know what to do

And you didn't want to *be there* anymore

Where Bad Men poked and prodded you with electricity

Where they hit you

And hurt you

And shoved you into closets and left you there for who knew how long

And touched you

And made you so so so so very afraid

And so you had escaped. You escaped into a cold, wet world, and you ran, and you got that nice man killed –

The man who gave you food –

And you knew you were a danger to any adult because the adults would call the Bad Men thinking they were Good Men

So you found Mike

And Mike Found You

You remembered hanging out with Mike. How scared you were. Would these people who were your size also call the Bad Men? Or would they listen to you and keep you?

They had to listen to you. You didn't want them to call the Bad Men and die.

Mike, who made you feel safe and listened to, and answered all your questions –

Papa had never answered any of your questions –

No one had ever explained *anything* to you, more than you *absolutely needed* to know –

And you played in his base-ment, and you talked, and he showed you his things, and he gave you food, and he protected you and hid you even when Lucas didn't want you to be hidden.

Yeah, he got mad at you, but that was because of the Bad Men, really, and he didn't know any better, and you managed to show him Will anyway.

And as you sat there in the Upside Down, and wandered around and tried to find a way out, all you could think about was Mike. And how you had saved Mike, over and over again –

At the Quarry

At the School

From the Monster

From the Bad Men

And really, Mike had saved you. Mike had saved you in the Forest

At the School

From the Monster

From the Bad Men

And you kept saving him because he kept getting hurt when he tried to save you. He kept getting hurt and losing people and you couldn't stand that you were the reason that happened to him.

He didn't deserve any of this.

You were a Monster – no matter what he said –

And you had opened the Gate –

So it was all your fault.

You stopped yourself from thinking these thoughts, though they still stabbed every inch of you – the thoughts stabbed your arms, your hands, your legs your feet your stomach your heart oh they made your heart hurt *so much* –

And you wandered the school, and you found... a hole

And it was gross and it was red and it was sticky but you had to get back to Mike you had to get out of this place where you felt so so so so so so alone and so scared and you opened it and you tumbled through and you wandered back to Mike's

And you looked in on the window

And the Bad Men were there

And he looked up back at you

And you could see it in his eyes

You couldn't go back there

Not without getting captured

But more than anything else, really

Not without getting Mike killed

And you ran

You ran so, so far

Until you hid under this tree, and now all you could think about really was how trapped and alone you were.

And how you had lost everyone again.

And how they were better off without you.

They had Will now, after all. They had Will, and they were safe, and the Monster was gone, and you – the Other Monster – was hidden away, and you could keep them safe just by staying htat way.

You sit there, and you stare out in front of you.

You remember hanging out with Mike in his basement

And the two of you talking about all the stuff he had

You remember how excited he got

And how happy it made you to talk to him

Is that what he meant?

By liking someone in a different way than a friend?

Did it really matter at this point?

You couldn't go back to him.

Not anymore.

You are going to live alone in the woods until you couldn't live anymore.

Shouldn't take long, really.

A part of you fills with relief. Too much of you fills with relief, really.

Yeah, you wish you could be with Mike. But clearly you couldn't.

Not Dustin, either

Or even Lucas

They are looking for you, and you would rather Mike live than you live or be with him, all of which can't happen together, so here you sit.

Under the log.

Trapped.

You remember when you were alone the second time.

Walking through the town.

Stealing Eggos from that store.

But you had felt it in your heart. As you ate your Eggos on the run, you looked for Mike in your mind. Because you had to find Mike. Because you didn't deserve to be in his party –

Because you had hurt Lucas, and you shouldn't have done that –

But you couldn't help it, you wanted to know where Mike was.

And you saw that he was in trouble. You saw that those other kids were threatening him and Dustin –

They were hurting them –

Chasing them through the forest –

You ran as fast as you could. You had to save them. You didn't care that you didn't belong in their party because, honestly, you couldn't let them get hurt.

And you went as fast as you could, because that one boy – the one you made pee – he had a knife

And you didn't want him to hurt Mike or Dustin

And you ran out there and you saw that Mike was jumping over the

edge –

Mike –

Mike no –

Your heart had seized up in your chest

Your mind had frozen with panic for one second

But then you stopped him from falling, because no

Mike was *not allowed to go*

And you pulled him back up, and all the kids looked at you in shock

And Mike had looked at you in shock

And the bad kids ran towards you

You didn't care about them

You broke his arm and made them *go away*

And you were so tired you fell and collapsed

And for a moment everything had been black

But then you had woken up and you saw Mike and he was shouting
for you

And you looked at him and you couldn't stop the words

“Mike... I'm sorry...”

“Sorry? What are you sorry for?”

“The gate... I opened it... I'm the monster...”

There, you said it

You finally had admitted it

“No,” Mike said, “No, El, you’re not the monster. You saved me. Do you understand?”

You watched him, and you knew friends didn’t lie, but you also didn’t think he was right, either, really. You might have saved him, but...

But you were still the monster.

“You saved me,” Mike had insisted.

And you would let him have that.

Even though he was wrong.

Even though you broke everything you touched.

But he made you feel okay.

He made you feel like you could fix the thing you broke.

He made you feel normal and safe and happy.

And you would do *anything* for him.

Even run away and keep him alive.

Even hide away in the woods forever.

Because you would just keep breaking him if you stayed with him.

You would just make him unsafe.

Because even though he made you feel safe, and he had made you feel happy and *okay* for the first time in your life, it was much more important –

Far more important –

For him to be alive.

You sit there, under the tree, and you start to fall asleep.

Every part of your body in pain

Both real, and the kind that comes from your head.

The corners of you had turned to ice, your body aching because you had done all this. You had made him unsafe.

You don't deserve anything.

You need to go away for your friends to be safe.

You wished you could say you were unfamiliar with this feeling.

But, the fact of the matter is, you aren't.

Notes for the Chapter:

Bit more experimental pacing here. I picture El's mind working very differently than Mike's or any person's mind, really - she doesn't think in chronological order. Her thoughts kind of go all over the place, they're chaotic and jumbled and I tried to get that across here.

It's also hard to write as her because it's difficult to gauge how much of her speech in Season 1 is not knowing words or concepts, and how much of it is being too afraid to talk. With her thoughts, I gave her some benefit of the doubt - she knows more than she says (after all, she doesn't ask for clarification about EVERY WORD, just the ones she really doesn't know), and thinks more than she says, because she's been taught to fear getting in trouble

I'm also trying to emphasize that her and Mike's depressions are different, or just in general feel different based on how they use metaphors to describe them. It'll be interesting going forward. I've definitely felt Mike's & El's at different points in my life, so there's that.

As for the implied sexual abuse, I just don't think it's

possible that no one at that horrible facility abused their power in this way towards El, or Kali, or any of the other kids that probably were there. I mean they prodded them with electrical sticks. At some point I might have El try to come to terms with it, but I'm not sure when or how much. It'll probably come up just in general as she gets older and she has to actually like, address that part of her life, but yeah. A lot of this story is up in the air at this point, even though I have a general idea of where it's going and what it's going to cover.

Thank you all for the comments - please keep them coming!!! If you want to talk to me more about the story and where it's going, I also have some tumblrs: Ornithoscelida, or A-Kulindadromeus-In-A-Trenchcoat. Thanks!

3. Drop by Drop

Notes for the Chapter:

Huge fucking content warning for mentions of slurs and graphic depictions of self harm

M A Y 1 2 1 9 8 4

M I K E W H E E L E R

You really thought that it would have gotten better by now.

But as you sit in your room, staring out the window, you realize that it is probably never going to get better.

The emptiness that took over your entire body so long ago has not gone away and *will* not go away.

Every single cell is filled with it.

You stare out in front of you and look at the wall opposite of you. At least the school year is almost over. At least you would finally not have to really worry about keeping up with schoolwork and all the rest.

It wasn't that your grades are *bad*, exactly, just that putting in the effort to try and get your homework done is getting harder and harder and harder and harder

Every word coming from your pencil comes from a place of agony. Every answer to a math problem is pulled out from your brain as though it would cling to it. Even science, your favorite subject, is hard to swallow, because *everything* is hard to swallow.

You just want to curl up in your bed and sleep for years and years and years.

The first morning you couldn't get out of bed, your mom just assumed you were sick. The second morning you couldn't get out of bed, it had been long enough that she assumed you were sick again.

The third she started to get suspicious.

The fourth she actively scolded you.

The fifth, she yelled at you.

The sixth? More yelling.

The seventh, Dad was brought in, and you just. Shut down. Even more.

The eighth, his quiet scolding voice got *loud*.

The ninth, now your dad was yelling at you too, and Dad *never* yelled.

This morning had been the tenth morning you couldn't get out of bed, and your mom had threatened you with grounding and taking away your toys, and your dad had said you had to get out of bed and you couldn't be a lazy man who didn't contribute to society and that was where you, a thirteen year old boy, was clearly headed.

And now you sit on your bed and you stare out the window, not really thinking much of anything, just existing, because that was hard enough.

At least it was Saturday and you didn't have to go anywhere except for the Synagogue in the morning.

You sigh.

Maybe today would be the day.

You pick up the walkie-talkie from beside your bed. You carry it with you pretty much everywhere, now, so you have it close at hand. You turn it to the right channel and hold it up to your mouth.

"El?"

You take a deep breath and say it again, "El? It's... It's Mike. It's day one-hundred and eighty-two."

You breathe deep again and let it out in a long sigh. You keep breathing slowly like that, to try and stop yourself from crying.

“I miss you.”

The words choke on their way out.

“I miss you so much. Everything feels... hollow. Without you.”

The moment you let the words escape your lips you regret them.

“Sorry, sorry, I shouldn’t have – I’m sorry –“

This is all *so stupid*.

“I hope you’re doing okay. I couldn’t... get out of bed again today. My parents had to drag me. Everything just feels so... empty.”

You breathe out again. You shouldn’t be telling her this.

Then again.

It’s not like she could hear you.

Cause if she could hear you, she would have talked to you by now.

“And it’s not just ‘cause I miss you, you know. It’s cause nothing about this is *fair*. It’s cause Will is broken after... everything, possibly forever. It’s cause even if you’re still out there, you can’t come back to me, cause the Bad Men. It’s *cause* the Bad Men. It’s cause... of everything. Nothing is fair. Nothing nothing nothing NOTHING!”

Your voice raises into a shout and you try to stop yourself.

“My parent *yelled at me* for feeling like this. Yelled! Yelled!”

You let out another long breath.

“They *yelled* at me, El... Why did they yell at me?”

You start crying, and you can’t make yourself stop.

It seems all you feel these days are anger and sadness, and nothing

else.

And you really only felt the first two things to feel *something*.

Yelling and crying drains you. You still have the walkie on.

But now you are just empty again.

“I miss you El. I hope I see you again soon.”

You don’t click off the walkie, but you lie back in the bed, staring up at the ceiling above you. You like to think that she’s listening to you, and it helps to press down the buttons. It gives your hands something to do.

You don’t really think about anything, really.

You just stare above you and you watch light on your ceiling dim from the outside.

Every second you lie there, you feel like more and more of you is hollowed out.

“Mike? Mike, are you on this?”

You sigh, and don’t respond to Lucas.

“Mike, why are you on this channel?”

You still don’t say much of anything at all. You don’t feel like it.

But you do release the button.

You stare up more and you swallow back – nothing, really.

Because you don’t feel enough to start crying.

You wish you could feel something again.

Even if it was only pain.

You miss the feeling of pain you had when you thought about El, before. And yeah, it hurt a lot, but at least it was feeling *something*. At

least it was knowing you were *alive*.

You stand up and you walk through the hallway, quietly. You enter the bathroom and shut the door before anyone can see you or try to call you back.

Reaching into a drawer in the bathroom, you pull out the razor your dad had gotten you when you got your first chin hair a month ago. Granted, it had been a single hair, and you hadn't needed to shave at all, but still. At least your dad had acted like an actual dad for once.

You stare at the razor for a long time, breathing in deeply.

You just want to feel pain again.

Because your pain has rendered you numb.

Numb and empty.

Just a second.

Just feel something for a *second*.

You grit your teeth and put it against your wrist and drag the razor across it horizontally, gasping quietly as it stings.

You barely cut the skin, though. It's shallow and only a few beads of blood are showing through it.

But at least it stung.

Panic seeps through your chest and you quickly hide the razor back in the drawer and dab at the blood on your wrist. You duck out of the bathroom and scurry back to your room, your heart pounding in your chest.

No one saw you.

You breathe with relief, and start crying again.

At least you felt something for a second.

Maybe you'd feel something for longer if you did it deeper.

You'll remember that for next time.

J U L Y 1 0 1 9 8 4

"Hey El," you say, holding down the button and talking to the walkie.

"It's... It's day two-hundred and forty-one."

You're in your room again.

You have already set aside the razor for the day. It is on your nightstand, fresh blood on the blade. You cover your wrist with a paper towel and hold it down to stop the bleeding.

You look forward to when it gets cold again, and you can just keep your wrists hidden by sleeves.

But it's the dead of summer and if you did that your parents would notice so you just try to stop the bleeding and hide the insides of your wrists against your body.

You've also done your thighs a couple of times. That keeps them hidden well enough, at least. But it also doesn't hurt as much and, well, isn't that half the point?

"I miss you."

You breathe in shakily again and huddle against your bed, resting your head against the blankets over the mattress. Everything feels so empty, still. You're a hollow soda can, every drop of liquid sucked out of you.

"I thought about you today. I was out at the creek with the party. We were skipping across the rocks that go across it and seeing who could go the fastest. Will is still kind of shaky in general, though, so he slipped and nearly fell. It was lucky that Lucas was out there to catch him, really. But the creek can get kind of... quick sand like. And so it was really scary, you know? Like. I didn't want him to get hurt. And all I could think about was if you were there it wouldn't have mattered if Lucas was also on the rocks or not, cause you could have easily saved him."

You ramble all this as fast as you can, staring down at your feet and peeling the tip of your toenails off absentmindedly.

“I mean, your powers aren’t the only reason I miss you. I hope you know that. I think you do.”

This is stupid.

She can’t even *hear* you.

“I just. That’s what made me think of you today. I try not to. It hurts to think about you, usually. Cause you’re not... here. And I. I really wish you were here.”

You run your free hand through your hair that’s gotten much, much too long. Your mom keeps yelling at you to get it cut, but you keep avoiding it, because honestly it would take too much effort at this point.

“The other day I realized I don’t remember what you smell like. I. Um. I just remember liking what you smelled like. That’s it. That’s all I can really remember.”

You take in a deep breath. Usually you feel nothing.

Now you’re feeling far, far, *far* too much.

“I. Um. Please. Please say something. If you can.”

You sit back and look in front of you, tears leaking from your eyes as you run your hands through your hair again. You keep running them through and crying, heavier and heavier.

Too much.

Too much.

This was.

Too much.

You grip your knees tightly and try to hold in the tears, but it’s hard.

It's really hard. You can't really stop yourself from heaving and sobbing into your legs. Your small body is shaking far, far, far too hard and you lie down on the ground, planting your face into the carpet of your room.

You don't know how long you sit there like that, sobbing. You know that neither of your parents nor your siblings have heard you – or if they did, they didn't think to check on you.

So alone.

So *damn alone*.

All the *damn time*.

Always alone.

You reach up for your nightstand again and you grab the razor off the surface. You flip it between your fingers, rotating it like some people would a coin. You frown down at it and sigh.

You tried to keep it to one a day, just so that it wouldn't be so noticeable.

But some days it was too much for that.

Just one more...

Just to let go of some of this pain...

You grit your teeth and hold onto your hair again, dropping the razor on the carpet.

"Stop crying, stop crying, stop crying," you whisper to yourself, rocking back and forth against the floor, "Just stop. Stop. Stop it, Mike. Stop."

But you can't stop.

The tears keep coming out no matter how much you try to get them to stop.

No matter how much you try to tell yourself some bullshit like

At least you got to meet El

At least you told her how you felt – kind of – before she was gone

At least you knew El, even for a little while

At least for a little while everything was good

At least for a little while you could believe in the world again

At least for a little while you were fixing everything and you were going to get Will back and defeat the Demogorgon and keep El safe and for like, a few days, you could believe it would be all right

But that is all bullshit

It's lies made up by grown ups to try and keep you alive and here but it is all lies all lies all lies all lies.

You pick up the razor again and drag it across your wrist again

And again

And again

Not too deep, just deep enough

Blood drips down from your arm and stains the carpet but you honestly don't care anymore

You take in a long, deep breath and you keep breathing slowly and steadily for a while as the blood runs down your arm. You feel fine – not too lightheaded or dizzy – so at least you didn't do too much, this time.

You remember when you did it a little too much and you almost fainted and you had to clean up all the mess and you hoped your parents wouldn't find out or Nancy and Nancy didn't at least which was good because she would have seen straight through your bullshit but your parents would have just yelled at you for “accidentally”

hurting yourself and would have probably just made literally everything worse.

The dripping of the blood burns your ears, though, and a shot of panic runs through your chest. You reach over for a rag you have under your bed and you tie it tight around your wrist.

You head downstairs, walking slowly and as quietly as you can so your parents can't hear you. Honestly, at this point you should have your own carpet cleaner bottle in your room, but it's expensive as fuck and you haven't saved up the money for it *quite* yet. Just a few more allowances, provided your parents don't get rid of it entirely for your "surly attitude" and "lazy behavior."

The floor boards creak under your foot, but your dad is asleep in his Lazy Boy and your mom is out driving Holly to one of her toddler activity things. Who knows where Nancy is.

You reach into the cabinet under the sink, grab the bottle without even needing to look, and scurry back upstairs before anyone hears you or calls after you.

The spray works like magic, clearing away the stains after some thorough scrubbing on your part. You dry it up with more rags and press them hard into the carpet, your mind now so focused on not getting found out that you aren't really thinking about your pain, much. You stow the rags away and bring the cleaner back downstairs, storing it away as the snores of your dad echo from the living room.

Just a little too much, today.

That's all it is.

Just a little too much.

S E P T E M B E R 2 6 1 9 8 4

"Son, you *really* need to focus on your studies, you know. If I had slacked off like you are in History and English, I would never have gotten into a good college. You can't be a scientist without going to college, you know."

Your parents have been scolding you for the past two hours.

“And hitting your teacher like that just because they said you weren’t trying? You shouldn’t punish people for being honest with you, son.”

You don’t respond to your father’s low, misunderstanding tone. It didn’t really matter, anyway.

“I got mad,” you mutter, before you can stop yourself, even though you know full well that won’t actually help anything.

“And we all get mad sometimes, son, but if we let that anger control us we’d be in the middle of a nuclear war by now, wouldn’t we?”

You say nothing, just look away from your parents at the dinner table. Nancy looks over at you worriedly. You don’t meet her eyes.

“Answer me, son.”

“Idiot,” you mutter under your breath before you can even stop yourself. Nancy groans.

“Michael,” your mother shouts, looking at you furiously, “Don’t talk back to your father like that.”

You look up at your mom and glare, not saying much of anything.

“Apologize, right now!”

You don’t say anything again. You don’t *want* to say anything. You’re not really in a talking sort of mood.

“Alright, that’s it, you’re grounded,” your mom says, “No Dungeons and Dragons, no allowance, no arcade, no leaving the house for a week.”

You open your mouth to protest – the arcade is one of the few parts of the week that actually cheer you up, even if it’s only for a few fleeting seconds. But before one word can leave your mouth, your dad speaks up again, his mouth filled with peas.

“Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time, son.”

You bristle with anger and sit back silently in your seat again, poking and prodding at your food until everyone gets up and you can finally leave for your room again. You run upstairs as fast as you can, not even turning back as your parents call after you. You go into your room and slam the door behind you, sitting down on the floor again and pulling out your walkie.

“Lucas? Will? Dustin? Anyone on this channel?”

Static meets your ears. You sigh.

“Guys? *Guys?*”

More static.

You yell in anger and throw the walkie across the room, holding your face in your hands and crying again. Everything is too much.

It was finally starting to get chilly enough again for you to wear long sleeves. Honestly, you did this so much now that you might never wear short sleeves again. You roll them up and grab your razor, holding it tightly between your fingers.

You were doing this too much. Your arm is starting to look like an old chalkboard, lines all over it from all the times someone’s pressed something into it just a little too hard. They’re red, and some of them are inflamed, and it’s kind of gross to look at. You grimace and drop the razor, reaching and picking back up your walkie.

“Will? Lucas?”

Static.

“Dustin?”

More static.

“... Please? Please can someone... answer me? Please?”

Static. Static. Static. Static. Static. Static. Static. Static.

You press down the button again, and your voice leaves in barely

more than a whisper, “El? Eleven?”

Static answers you back.

“El... it’s day three-hundred and nineteen...”

Static.

“I got... really mad today. *Super* mad. Like when you made the van tip over, mad.”

Static.

“I just. I’m having so much trouble focusing on school. And it’s not because of you. Or, at least, it’s not... *just*... because of you. It’s because of everything. It’s because of Will, and the Demogorgon, and the Bad Men, and the fact that you’re gone and can’t come back, and the fact that my dad said he didn’t understand why my mom needed to take off work tomorrow even though it’s Rosh Hashanah and my dad *knows* that my mom can’t work on Rosh Hashanah and it’s like my Dad just figured that him being Christian wouldn’t matter and it was all the same but that’s *not what it is* and we celebrate Christmas for him so why can’t he be chill about everything else and and and because of the fact that Lucas got beat up by racists again this week, or the fact that someone wrote the k word on my locker again, and then of course there are the bullies who call Will... bad names... too... and Dustin’s made fun of for his disability, and everything’s... just... so bad. So bad. And I just hurt. So much. And I decided to take it out on my teacher, and I know I shouldn’t have, but I just. Couldn’t hold it in. And I exploded. I dunno. I guess I figured you’d understand... cause I’m sure you’ve exploded too, before.”

This is stupid.

“It just. It really would help if you could give me a. A sign, you know? I guess? I dunno. I miss you. I miss you El. I miss you. I...”

You let out another long breath.

“I miss the way you smile. It’s such a small smile but I miss it anyway. I l... like that it’s small.”

You pull at the carpet.

“I miss your fuzzy head. I know you wanted hair and I want you to have hair, because that’s what you want, obviously, but I miss how fuzzy your head was.”

You take in a deep, shaking breath this time, trying to hold back tears.

“I miss... how nice it was... to hug you? To hold you? I’m sorry if that’s creepy. I’m sorry if that’s creepy. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

You rock back and forth and start sobbing in full, now.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

You grab the razor and finally put it up against your wrist. You draw it back once, twice, a third time. You keep repeating sorry, even though the walkie is off now, because it’s not like she needs the walkie to find you anyway, and it’s not like she’s alive to find you anyway.

No.

Don’t give up on her.

Don’t give up on her.

Don’t give up on her.

Give up on yourself.

But don’t give up on her.

You drag it back more and more, until you’re bleeding so much it fills your nostrils.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m... I’m sorry. I’m... sorry. I’m... s... sorry... I’m sorry... I’m...”

You keep mumbling the words over and over again. As you start to black out, you could have sworn you heard El's voice, whispering, almost frantically, for you – "Mike! Mike! Mike!"

But you pass out anyway, fading into the blackness.

You're woken up by shaking, and you groggily open your eyes again to see Nancy staring down at you, her mouth open in shock and her whispering angrily.

"Mike! *Mike!* WAKE UP!"

You sit up, more alert, looking at her in surprise.

"Nancy?"

"Oh thank God," Nancy breathes, sitting down across from you in a huff.

"What... what's going on? Why are you in my room?"

"I came in to check on you. I know you haven't been dealing with... anything, and I know Mom and Dad taking out their anger about the whole Rosh Hashanah fiasco on you was uncool, and I... I know I don't talk to you enough."

You nod, looking down at your wrist. It's absolutely stained with blood, and there's a large spot on the carpet.

"Fuck," you mutter. Nancy looks at you with her face etched with heartbreak.

"Grab me the carpet cleaner from underneath the bed, would you?" you ask, grimacing as you look down at the mess you've made. Nancy breathes in sharply, but she reaches underneath and hands you the bottle you saved up for so long for.

"Did you try to kill yourself?"

"No," you say firmly, "No I didn't."

"Mike..."

"I didn't. This isn't how you do it to kill yourself anyway. You gotta go down the arm," you say logically, the words tumbling out of your mouth and not connecting to anything similar to emotions or sensitivity towards the topic.

Nancy is shocked into silence, her mouth open for a long time as she just stares at you.

"You've... thought about it?" Her voice comes out in barely more than a whisper, really.

"No. Yes. Maybe. I dunno. Maybe."

Nancy sighs for a long time, not saying much of anything.

"How long have you been hurting yourself?"

You swallow. "Since May..."

Nancy frowns, "So all those times you got blood stains on things and Mom and Dad yelled at you for getting into accidents..."

"One hundred percent on purpose."

Nancy sighs again.

"Mike, I know you miss her, but..."

"This isn't only about her."

"It isn't?"

"No," you say calmly, "It's about... it's about everything."

Nancy settles into a cross-legged position, sitting and watching you calmly as you gather your words.

"It's about the fact that El was kept locked up in that prison for her whole life and was completely fucked over by the government just so they can fight the Russians. It's about the fact that even if El is still alive... I hope she's still... but even if she is, she can't come back, because the government will kill everyone she loves if she does. It's

about the fact that Will was called all those... bad words... like faggot and stuff... before and now he's called both that and Zombie Boy and he's just. Not himself anymore. It's about the fact that Barb is lost forever and her parents will keep looking for her forever and no one's going to tell her parents the truth and we're all just trapped because these people have all the power they fucked up all our lives and we're never going to get them back. It's about the fact that people wrote kike on my locker again, or the fact that Lucas got beat up for being black again, or the fact that Dustin still gets made fun of for his cleidocranial dysplasia, or the fact that Dad is being like this to Mom even though they've been married, like, forever, and she celebrates Christmas for him so why can't he just let her have her holidays and let us have them too, and it's about the fact that no matter what I did last year people still got hurt and people still died and I couldn't do anything and El is lost and El deserved better and everything's a mess, the whole world is a mess, and everything hurts, and I just feel empty so much and so often that when I'm empty I want to feel pain again but when I feel too much pain I want to release it and I'm. I'm a mess, Nancy. I'm a mess."

Nancy looks at you with tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mike."

"I'm sorry too," you whisper.

Nancy sighs, "I understand, you know."

"You... do?"

"Do you honestly think I *don't* feel like this after last year?"

You shrug.

It's hard to remember that everyone suffered just as much as you did, sometimes.

"I just... I guess I take it out in different ways," Nancy sighs.

"Like drinking?" you ask quietly. Nancy looks at you for a long time before sighing again.

“Yeah. I drink. Probably too much. Steve watches me for it though. And I smoke now, which, I know, is bad, but... yeah.”

You nod and look down at the floor.

“Just, promise me one thing, okay?”

You look up at her again.

“Just, if you really hurt yourself bad again, like this, come find me, okay? I promise to help.”

“You’re not going to lecture me about how I should stop?”

Nancy lets out a long sigh again, “Since that would be the pot calling the kettle black, no. Just, if you *can* find it in yourself to stop...”

“Same to you,” you mutter. Nancy nods, pausing again.

“Shanah fucking tovah,” she mutters quietly. You laugh.

“Shanah fucking tovah.”

And you both sit there together for a while, in silence, as you clean up the blood from the floor and wonder again about the voice you had heard.

But it was probably just your brain imagining things.

What else could it have really been?

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeah so fun fact - not once in season two does Mike wear short sleeves.

He does in season one, which takes place later in the year than season two.

So that's your fun fact of the day.

Also, I'm pissed as hell that multiple actors in Stranger Things are Jewish (either in practice or

ethnically) but they are all shown celebrating Xmas at the end of Season One. Joyce has divorced her shit husband and has a bunch of Xmas lights still, though, so I decided that Mike's family is Jewish but they celebrate Xmas for their Dad, and he's an ass, so of course he isn't culturally sensitive about it.

Looks like I'm going to have to have two chapters apiece for season 2 - the interim between seasons & then the season proper - for both Mike & El. Sorry about that.

Thanks for all the comments and please keep them coming! Sorry for the darkness of this chapter, it had to be done.

4. Sip by Sip

Notes for the Chapter:

Trigger Warning for Underage Drinking, Implied self-harm and Described Self-Harm, and Vomiting(?)

AUGUST 20 1984

JANE IVES

Today was the day.

You had watched him for a while, after all.

And then you would wait for him to fall asleep – either in his room, or on the couch, or wherever he decides to sleep – and you'd go get it.

Because you knew where he'd keep it.

And you knew when he'd get it.

Today was that day.

Today was the day you knew he would go to the store before coming to you.

Today you sat there. You talked nice to him – indeed, you had a very nice talk.

But all you felt was ice, and pain, and longing, because you were trapped in this *damn house* where there wasn't a single *damn thing to do*.

Except for drink that disgusting stuff.

Nothing to do, nothing to do, nothing to do –

Just TV and homework and TV and books and TV and homework and no one to talk to at all

Trapped, Imprisoned

You deserve it though, because you're a Monster

So you drink the disgusting stuff cause what else is there to do

What else

What else

What else

You sit there now, doing multiplication tables he had given you as he falls asleep slowly on the couch. Tonight he is planning on going to his actual house, according to him, so you should probably go out there now.

He's snoring.

You could of course do more homework

But that just sounds like more of the same

You sneak outside once in a while but mostly you're only inside only inside only inside

But you need to drink the disgusting stuff

It makes you feel numb

Numbness is weird

But good

Different from feeling too much

You swallow heavily and open the door, sneaking outside and quietly walking towards Hop's car.

There are birds singing but the sound burns your ears

You love breathing in fresh air but you know you can't enjoy it

Quickly, you unlock the trunk of it with your mind, simply flicking your head to the side.

You then reach in and grab all of the bottles, levitating the ones you can't actually carry with your hands.

You realize you should probably leave some behind so you only grab a few of the things, leaving about half for him.

The birds are loud, loud, loud, too loud too loud too loud

You scurry back into the cabin, relief flooding through you at the sight of him still asleep.

At least Hop is asleep.

You quietly stash all the bottles in your bedroom, stuffing them under the bed.

Dust fills your nostrils and you cough.

It stings a little.

You go back out to the kitchen and work more on the multiplication tables, which are hard, and make your head hurt, but you work on them anyway, because one day maybe you'll get to go to school with Mike.

And Dustin and Lucas and Will, of course, but you're not going to lie to yourself: you mostly want to be there for Mike.

You finish the sheet and sit back, waiting for Hop to wake up.

He's still snoring, and his snores are loud and annoying. You reach and you stand next to him. You hold up your sheet of paper like it's the most valuable thing in the world.

"Wha? Wha?" Hop groggily leaps up and looks around, finally seeing you. He frowns.

"What is it, kid?"

You hold up your multiplication table sheet.

“Finished.”

“Good for you, kid!” Hop cheers, grabbing it and looking it over.

He grimaces.

“I’ll check these tonight and bring them back tomorrow, alright?”

You nod, shrugging slightly.

You wish he would stay.

You wish you weren’t alone.

“Are you going to be alright here alone tonight?”

You nod again.

You think about how last night, the sounds of some dogs barking kept you up all night, because you were worried that the dogs would come after you, but they didn’t, so you just lost sleep, but it’s not like you have anything to do during the day, so you put on your blindfold and you went to sleep anyway, but the daytime was even *louder*, so you’re very tired right now.

Hop sighs, “I’m sorry, kiddo. I know I should be staying the night with you. But there’s been a few problems with vandalism back in town and I really should be by the phone to check those out.”

You nod, but you can’t help the tears that leak from your eyes.

You remember the way Mike had gotten last night, with all the cuts on his arm and the blood on his hands, and you wish that you could be with him, but you know you can’t.

You think about how you feel so lost and helpless here, like you’re trapped in the Lab again.

That’s what Hop calls it. A “lab”. But you don’t know what that means. You just know it means Bad. Bad place. Bad men. Bad Papa.

Bad.

Bad like you.

Monster Number One.

Hop leans forward and holds onto your arms, “Why not visit with Mike, or Dustin, or Lucas today? That way you’ll feel less alone.”

“No,” you say firmly.

“No?”

Visiting Mike makes you feel even worse.

Not today.

It would be too much today.

You already feel like ice, so alone, so in pain, every bit of you, pain, pain, pain, and seeing Mike like that would be even more pain. Too much pain.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Alright, well I know you’re strong enough,” Hop reaches out and shakes your curly hair, “Little scrapper.”

You make a face at that.

What does it even mean?

He gets up to leave in his car, pulling out of the dirt road and driving away.

You listen for a long time.

You can hear the wind creaking between the trees.

It’s a kind of music, you think.

The moment you know he’s gone, you make sure everything’s as locked as possible.

You groan happily as the ice and the pain in every part of you ebbs away a little, replaced with a tingling as your brain spins.

Spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
spinning

You have a wave of nausea.

Oh no.

Not barf.

Last time Hop had been so concerned he almost found out you drank his special drinks.

You try to contain it.

You swallow back the bile.

You breathe slowly and as much as your chest will let you.

Spin spin spin spin spin spin spin spin

In and out, in and out, in and out, in and out.

Your brain is swimming quicker now, but at least the pain is gone.

The ice ebbs away.

You stand up and sway on your feet – so dizzy!

You hobble into the kitchen and go for the sink – you need water. You need water. It tastes cool on your tongue. Your head is spinning so much you feel like you're going to pass out.

You stumble to your room and stuff all of the drinks underneath some clothes so they aren't noticeable even if you look under the bed.

You then go and sit on your bed, staring out into space.

The drink does weird things to your brain, weird things you like. As it sets in more, your perception starts to flick in and out, from this world to the Void.

One minute you're sitting on your bed, looking over at the other wall.

The next you're looking at Mike, sitting in his room, his walkie in his hand.

You wander over to him, but then you're back in your room again.

You look around in confusion.

You blink, back to Mike.

Mike is crying.

You hurt all over again.

You squint tighter and you're not with Mike anymore.

You open your eyes and you see your room.

You flash again, without closing your eyes.

Mike is still sad.

You close your eyes, you've left the Void.

You open them, back in your room.

You know you can't ignore Mike.

You can't leave him in pain like that.

You take in a deep breath and close your eyes again, trying to concentrate. Trying to focus.

Back.

Back with Mike.

Void.

You take a deep breath, even though between the drink and the Void the pain is back in your body again, sharp stabbing sharp stabbing –

You walk towards Mike. Mike is crying. He's crying a lot. His wrist has a lot of blood on it. You want to hold him. You want to talk to him. You want to make him better.

You want you want you want you want you want you want you want you want you *want*.

“El... El... it's day two-hundred and eighty-two...”

He lets out a long, long cry.

You can't help but cry with him.

“Today school started. I wish. I wish you were going to school with me. With us, I mean. I don't know. I don't know what I mean. El. El I miss you. I missed you too much today.”

He's just bleeding, blood running down his arm, not a lot of it, but enough that it looks like a Monster has bit him.

Maybe a Monster *has* bit him.

You cry more.

“Mike,” you whisper, before you can stop yourself. Mike looks up. He looks right at you. But he can't see you. He doesn't know you're there.

You reach for his bloody wrist, but your hand goes through him because you aren't real, either.

You flash back to the cabin.

You cry more still.

Are you real?

Or are you just... what?

A ghost?

You're too nauseous. You vomit all over the floor.

The smell fills your nose.

Everything hurts and spins and spins and spins and spins

You vomit again and again and again and again and again and again
and again and again

The vomit is all over the carpet and you don't know what to do with
it.

You crawl into your bed and lie on your side, staring out in front of
you. You want to sleep. Everything is spinning so much you want to
sleep.

So you sleep.

J U N E 2 0 1 9 8 4

Today you had VODKA.

It was stronger than the BEER or the WINE.

Hop had left it in the kitchen, forgetting it before he went to work.

You saw that it had ALCOHOL on it and you wanted to see how it
was different.

And now your head is spinning harder than ever before.

Everything is misty.

Everything is weird.

Everything is everywhere is everywhere is everywhere.

You're already in the Void. You don't even see Mike.

You don't even see anyone.

Briefly, you see Dustin. Dustin is walking, and humming, and kicking
rocks.

But then he's gone.

You're alone again, and you spin, and you can't find your balance,
and you fall in the water.

You groan in pain and you crawl to your feet, and you see Lucas, and
he's talking on his walkie, and he's asking for Mike, and Mike isn't
answering.

Mike.

Mike.

Your head is going too too too fast for you to try to find him.

You just whisper.

"Mike."

Spin spin spin.

"Mike?"

You feel sick to your stomach.

You double over in pain.

You groan quietly.

"Mike?"

Suddenly you see him.

He's in his room.

He's staring off into space again.

He looks sad again.

He doodles on a piece of paper, not really drawing anything, but he
looks sad and lost again.

You wander over to him, your steps going every which way – zig zag

zig zag zig –

You don't say anything because last time Hop found out that Mike was hearing you because he told Will that he was "hearing things" and Hop got super mad but he said he was sorry too he was just scared and I "had to be more careful" because talking to Mike was "dangerous" and dangerous? Ha!

You know who's dangerous?

You.

And you know you're a Monster and you don't deserve anything good not Hop not Mike not anyone but hey

At least you can save yourself

You stumble to Mike and you sit with him, watching him draw. He draws a lot of things with dark colors. Black and navy and indigo and forest green and dark, blood red.

He looks at his drawing a long time. It's a monster in the sky. A monster like The Other Monster.

He sighs. He shivers.

It's hot and summer and you're uncomfortable so you don't know why he shivers.

He reaches over to the table and grabs the metal thing again. You groan.

You hate watching this.

It tears you up inside.

You don't want to watch it.

No no no no no.

But you can't tell him to stop.

He digs it in. Blood comes out. He sighs and breaths, almost as

though happy. You cry, but say nothing.

Why does he like this so much?

Did it make the pain him go away, like the ALCOHOL does for you?

You frown and blink back.

Just a little blood.

You lose that all the time.

You get up and walk over to the kitchen. You find a knife, and you dig it into your skin.

It hurts.

It hurts.

IT HURTS

IT HURTS

IT HURTS

It hurts too too too too TOO TOO TOO much. Too much. Too much.

You gasp and put the knife away quickly, pressing paper into your arm. Ow.

Ow.

Ow.

You have accidentally bumped yourself and hurt yourself when you've had ALCOHOL before. It doesn't hurt as much as bumps and pains when you haven't had it.

But this stings so much you don't understand how Mike can do it without ALCOHOL.

You decide making yourself bleed isn't for you.

A P R I L 6 1 9 8 4

Boredom and your brain don't mix.

You sit in the cabin, looking at the TV, but not watching it.

Nothing really to watch anyway.

It's starting to get warm outside.

The cabin is kinda hazy because of it.

Hopper left in a rush last night, and doesn't think he'll be back today.

You sigh and stare at your fingernails. They're kind of dirty. But you don't care much. Who's going to see them?

Hop. Hop will see them.

You're too tired to clean them.

Spend all day just sitting around and still too tired to do anything.

Today Mike couldn't get out of bed, and you couldn't either.

You know because you visited him.

You know you shouldn't visit him.

But visiting him makes you happy.

Not that anything can make you really happy.

Every inch of you is ice.

And you're a monster.

You whisper to Mike even though he's safer thinking you're dead.

That's what Hop says.

Hopefully Hop will make it back today.

When Hop was gone you got even more tired because you didn't have anyone to talk to.

You didn't talk for years and years but now that you do talk you need to do it. What did that even mean?

You know how tired Mike is, too. And how he has trouble getting out of bed.

You worry about Mike.

You worry about Hop.

You worry about everyone but you.

Because you don't matter.

You wander through the kitchen and stare around. There are things on the counter, word of last week – utensils. Hop uses them to cook. There's a bowl of fruit, too. Grapes.

You take a grape and eat it, making a face.

Not as good as Eggos.

Nothing is as good as Eggos.

You wish Hop would get you more Eggos.

You remember when Mike first gave you Eggos.

You remember when you first saw Mike in the rain and the forest.

You smile even though it hurts.

You feel bad that you introduced him to you, a Monster.

You look at the counter more, and see a bottle of that stuff Hop drinks. It says "BEER" on it.

You don't know what BEER is. You just know that Hop drinks it and

he gets a little more cheerful, a little more goofy.

He'll put on the record player and dance to music with you and make you laugh and make you feel like a person instead of a monster and make some of the ice go away.

You remember when he and you cleaned up this place together. You remember finding him silly and weird. But he was nice and he gave you food and he was going to keep you safe.

Safe.

Why do people keep wanting to keep you safe when you're a monster?

You grab the BEER and you frown at it. It smells bad. But you put it to your mouth anyway and take a drink.

You immediately spit it back out in the sink.

Gross! So gross!

Yuck Yuck Yuck Yuck!

But you're curious. Why would Hop drink this if it was gross? Maybe there's a reason. Maybe the gross is worth it?

You drink it again and force it to go down.

Ow!

It stings.

It stings it stings it stings it stings.

You grimace.

You drink it again.

And again.

Until all of it is gone.

You don't feel any different. So you walk back to the TV, sitting in front of it, watching nothing. Nothing is on. Nothing ever on.

Your head starts to feel kinda light.

You feel a little dizzy.

Buzzy.

You frown and you look in front of you and you sway a little in your spot.

Buzz buzz buzz buzz

The ice kind of goes back a little

The pain starts to ease up, just a little

You wonder if Mike would enjoy seeing you like this. Kind of goofy. Kinda dancy.

You know he wanted to dance with you at the Snow Ball.

Snow Ball.

Monster and Knight at the Snow Ball.

You giggle to yourself and lie back on the floor, looking up.

You think about Mike, and kissing Mike.

You think about the man and woman in white coats who kissed in front of you in the Lab. They were watching you while you did things with your mind.

You asked them what they were doing. They told you kissing.

They told you kissing was a thing grown-ups did with special people.

Papa didn't like that they told you that.

You didn't see much of them after. You saw them once or twice, but they were in other parts of the Lab. Papa said they did other jobs.

You remember when Mike kissed you.

You knew you weren't a grown-up. But you thought Mike was pretty special.

You remember the swooping feeling in your stomach.

The BEER makes you feel better.

You remember happy feelings instead of pain.

You remember kissing Mike instead of the fact that you're a Monster.

You close your eyes and, suddenly, you see Mike.

Mike is sitting in his basement. He is looking at a book and sighing. He doesn't look happy.

You gasp and open your eyes, looking above you in surprise. How did you go to the Void? How did you see Mike? You didn't have your blindfold, or the TV snow, or a bathtub, or anything.

You close your eyes again.

Mike is still reading. He closes the book and sighs. He looks up in your direction.

Sometimes you wonder if he can see you.

But are you seeing him?

You open your eyes again. You still feel buzzy and light and happy. You close your eyes again.

You walk towards Mike in the dark, feet splashing against water that doesn't exist. Mike pulls out his walkie. He bites his lip and holds it up to his face.

"Hey El. It's day one-hundred and forty-six. Today in class I got bored _"

It is day one-hundred and forty-six.

But you haven't heard Mike talk today.

And you haven't visited him today.

Maybe you *are* in the Void.

You open your eyes and gasp, looking ahead of you, breathing heavily. Everything's spinning still, and you're out of the BEER.

You close your eyes, and go back to Mike.

This is a lot easier than TV snow and nosebleeds.

Perhaps you would drink BEER again.

M A Y 1 4 1 9 8 4

"Mike! Mike! Mike!" you shout, watching as Mike drags the sharp bit of metal into his arm again.

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts –

You can feel his pain, in the Void, and you feel your own pain, because you are a *Monster* –

"Shit," he mutters, "Shit shit shit. I shouldn't be doing this. I said I wouldn't do it again. I said just two times, two times and then I'd stop, shit shit shit shit shit."

It is day one-hundred and eighty-four and you have the feeling that Mike is in trouble.

It was weird the first time, when he made himself bleed on purpose. You felt sad the second time, but you figured it was just because he was still curious.

But this is the third time and now you're really really worried.

There is more blood this time. Lots more. It's kind of everywhere and

Mike is panicking.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. I have to. I have to clean this up. I have to clean. It up. Shit.”

“Mike,” you whisper, before you stop yourself, even though you know if Hop finds out he’ll be *mad*, but you whisper it anyway, and you want Mike to hear you.

“El?” he gasps, looking up from his wrist, blood dripping – drip drip drip drip – onto the carpet.

“El?” he says again.

“Mike,” you whimper, unable to say more, because the blood is getting everywhere, and you don’t know how to make him stop.

Mike’s lips part and he looks right where you are, leaning forward, reaching out with his hand. But he touches nothing, because you’re a Ghost, and he’s a Ghost.

And the connection breaks, and you scream and cry, and you lie down on the floor and you cry some more.

BEER.

Or WINE.

You need one of them.

Did Hop leave any behind?

You scramble to your feet. You remember when you figured out WINE did the same thing as BEER, and tasted a little sweeter. A little better. A little easier to swallow.

Hop had left WINE in the fridge and you had taken it and drunk it because you didn’t know what it was and it looked like grape soda. It *wasn’t* grape soda, but it made you buzz like the BEER had. You had read more of the bottles and saw both of them had the word ALCOHOL on them, in big letters. You knew that that was what they had in common.

You find WINE in the fridge and you take it out. You focus with your mind, squinting hard in concentration. The weird rubbery thing at the top comes flying out. You take the bottle and you drink it as fast as you can. There isn't a lot left, but it's enough to get your mind spinning.

You take the bottle and throw it in the stash you have of all the other empty bottles.

You don't drink enough for Hop to notice, but the pile is getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger.

Whenever you're bored.

Whenever you're sad.

Whenever you're *so sad*.

Whenever you can't stop thinking about how you're a monster.

You find anything in the house you can and you drink. Not that there always is something.

But Hop is – word of last month – careless – and most often there is something. Something he forgets about anyway.

You sit on the floor of the kitchen and you stare out in front of you.

You flit – in out in out – Void not Void not –

You brace yourself –

Sometimes you reach the Upside Down and you get scared –

The Other Monster is Dead but there are still things to fear –

Void not Void not Void not Void –

Mike.

You breathe with relief.

He's still breathing too.

He's got wrappings on his arm and he's breathing slowly, resting his head against his knees.

"I screwed up. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

You walk towards him and you sit across from him. You watch him, until the buzz wears off and you're back in the cabin. You watch him wander the house, you watch him read a book, you watch him check the wrappings.

You make sure he doesn't do it again.

S E P T E M B E R 2 6 1 9 8 4

"MIKE. MIKE. MIKE."

You scream it at the top of your lungs.

You keep screaming even after he passes out.

"MIKE! MIKE! MIKE! *MIKE! MIKE! MIKE! MIKE! MIKE!*"

"Kid! *Kid!*"

You're being shaken. You take off the blind fold and look up at Hop. You grip his sleeves and start sobbing, because you can't stop yourself. You can't stop yourself from sobbing.

"Kid, what have I told you about –"

"Mike's in trouble! Mike's in trouble! He's in trouble he's in trouble he's in trouble he's in trouble he's –"

Hop sits down and holds onto your shoulders, looking straight into your eyes, "Kid, *breathe*. Breathe, alright?"

You breathe in, but your heart is pounding as fast as it can, and you can't think straight, you can only think of all the blood, so much blood, too much blood, all that blood around Mike –

"Okay, how is Mike in trouble?" Hop asks.

You breathe in again.

You remember the blood.

You start to sob.

“El, I can’t help if you don’t compose yourself.”

Your head snaps up at the sound of your name.

Hop never used your name.

You breathe out, slowly, and try to stop crying. You can’t.

You just can’t.

You mumble through your tears instead.

“Mike – he – is – in – he’s –“

“I know, he’s in trouble, but I’m going to need a little more *information* than that. Please try, El.”

You breathe in again and you know that Mike could be really really hurt –

“Mike hurt himself. Blood. Lots of blood. Lots and lots of –“

“How did he hurt himself?”

You just hold up your hand and make a sawing motion across your wrist.

“Jesus,” Hop breathes. You don’t know who this Jesus is, but Hop mentions him a lot when he’s angry or upset.

“Alright, look, I’m going to go back to my house and call their house, alright? I’ll get Nancy on it. You *stay here* and try to stay calm. Keep an eye on the kid, but *don’t say anything more*, alright?”

You look at him and you shake your head madly.

Your mind is spinning too much and you have too many words going through your brain to focus on the Void.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“Too scared. Too weak. Too many thoughts. Too hard. Too hard. *Too hard.*”

“Okay,” Hop pauses, “Okay, look. This isn’t going to happen... ever, if I can help it. Not ever again. But I’ll give you some beer, alright?”

You look up at him in shock. So shocked, you can’t make words.

“Drink it and keep an eye on him,” Hop explains, handing you the beer and groaning, “When you get out of here we’re going back to bathtubs, *do you hear me?*”

You nod and you drink it.

The familiar warmth spreads over you.

You wait – beer isn’t quite enough to do it, but your thoughts have mostly slowed down now –

Spinning, spinning, not so much spinning, but some –

You’re in the Void.

Mike is passed out, blood still oozing from his arm.

You walk over to him as quickly as you can and you wait, you sit, you watch, you breathe.

You keep breathing because you need to stay calm.

Mike is breathing too.

At least Mike is breathing too.

At least Mike is breathing too.

You sit there and watch him, chest up and down, up and down, up and down.

Mike.

Mike.

You wish you could say something like –

Why do you hurt yourself?

But now you know that you hurt yourself too.

Just differently.

And now Hop's made you stop.

And every day hurts.

And you wish you had the alcohol again.

But Hop doesn't let you.

And you can't get the stuff on your own.

You hear the ringing of Mike's phone in the distance. You breathe with relief. You watch and you wait, and suddenly Nancy's walking into your vision, and she's leaning down, and she's shaking him awake.

You return back to the cabin and burst into tears.

You did this to him.

You're the Monster.

AUGUST 21 1984

"What is all this?"

You wake up to Hop shouting.

He's shouting *really really* loudly.

Everything hurts, and you can't open your eyes because that would make it hurt more.

“Go away,” you mumble.

“I’ll go away when you answer – what’s going on? Why did you vomit so much?”

You squint your eyes open and look at him. He looks upset – not mad, but scared. Upset.

“Is this a – I don’t know – a psychic kid thing? This isn’t the first time you’ve vomited all over, kid. What’s going on?”

“Got sick,” you mutter quietly, “Still sick. Going back to bed now.”

“No, kid, that isn’t sick-vomit. I don’t know what it is, but it’s more vomit than someone who’s only a hundred pounds can produce.”

And Mike kept losing more blood than someone a hundred pounds could produce.

You think about Mike, bleeding, bleeding, bleeding –

You want to vomit again but you stop yourself.

You sit up and keep your eyes closed, “Everything hurts. Please no more words.”

“I’m going to take your temperature, kid –“

“No, I’m fine. Go back to work.”

“I’m done for the day, kid, it’s almost seven.”

You open your eyes now, as wide as they’ll go, even though it hurts to do so.

“Did I sleep all day?”

“Seems like it, kid. You must be really sick. I’ll go get you some food – “

Your stomach still feels *horrible*. You shake your head quickly. It pounds so much you want to cry.

“No. Still sick.”

Pounding, pounding, pounding, pounding -

“Kid, I have to make sure you’re not dying or something, alright? Let me take your temperature –“

You knew you felt like this after you drank the terrible stuff, but you’ve never felt *this* bad -

“I’m not dying.”

Pounding, Pounding, Pounding, *Pounding* -

“You’re sick –“

POUNDING, POUNDING, POUNDING, POUNDING -

“I made myself sick!” you finally shout.

Hop looks at you for a long time, his mouth partially open.

“You... made yourself sick? Did you make yourself barf or something?”

You shake your head, “No.”

“Then –“

“I drank your VODKA.”

Hop looks at you for a long time. You look at Hop for a long time.

“So that’s where it all goes,” he finally said after a while.

You don’t say anything.

His voice has gone into that tone it gets when he’s *really mad*.

Last time it happened it was when you talked to Mike and he mentioned it to Will who’s mom mentioned it to Hop.

“I’m sorry,” you mumble after a while.

“Kid, you shouldn’t eat or drink things without asking – unless it’s something you’ve had before – you could have hurt yourself.”

Hop looks around the room.

He seems to be trying to compose himself.

“You *have* hurt yourself.”

You nod silently.

“How much... have you been doing this?”

You breathe in and out.

How much?

Every day you can.

Every time you can find something to swig.

Every time you need to see Mike and your powers are weak.

You think about Mike and you almost start to cry again.

You think about the ice in your body and the fact that you’re a Monster.

You think about Mike bleeding and bleeding and bleeding.

You have to watch him.

You have to make sure he doesn’t die.

You have to fix the fact that you’re a Monster.

You have to make sure his blood doesn’t come out too much.

“Almost every day.”

“*Jesus*, El. Why?”

You look up at him and start to cry. You cry so much you can’t stop.

“Kid, Kid –“

You keep sobbing and suddenly Hop is holding you, he’s hugging you and holding you against him and you turn to sob into his chest.

“Everything hurts.”

“I know, Hangovers are the worst –“

“No. I mean. That’s why.”

“You drink every day because... everything hurts?”

“Every part of me hurts. It makes the hurt go away.”

Hop sighs for a long, long time.

“And. I can see Mike. Without putting on the blindfold. Or the TV snow.”

Hop sighs again.

“Oh, kid...”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It helps. I’m sorry.”

Hop pulls you away and looks straight into your eyes, bending down to do so.

“I don’t know how it makes it easier to see Mike, but I understand the second thing. Look... I know it makes everything hurt less, okay? Why do you think I drink the stuff?”

You manage to laugh weakly.

“But you’re small. You’re still growing. You’re just a kid. And that stuff hurts growing kids, okay? It’s hurting your brain. It’s turning your brain to mush. That’s probably why you can go and see Mike, or something like it.”

Mike makes himself bleed.

You make your brain mush.

Two sides of the same coin.

“And if you drink too much, you can hurt other parts of you, too. And you can get dependent on it – that’s your word for the day. Dependent. Means you can’t stop drinking it, which makes your brain more mush, and makes you more likely to hurt other parts of you.”

You nod.

Dependent.

“Addicted. You can get addicted, kid. Second word of the day.”

Addicted.

Addicted.

Addicted.

“So, I’m sorry, but I’m going to be more careful about the alcohol, okay? You can’t have it anymore. I’m sorry.”

You nod.

You can’t have anything anymore.

You’re bored, in the cabin, with nothing to do, no one to see, no way to stop the pain. No one to stop the ice. Nothing to stop you from remembering you’re a Monster.

You really thought that it would have gotten better by now.

But, as you sit in your room, staring at Hop, you realize that it is probably never going to get better.

Notes for the Chapter:

Fun times all around.

It was harder to write the garbled-Jane thoughts in the present tense, so I made the events be out of order. I hope it comes across.

I feel like, since Hop has a drinking problem himself, he wouldn't be as... furious about it. I think that the fight in S2 between him and Jane over her leaving the cabin is probably bigger than all of their other fights combined, honestly. Hop is mad that she started drinking, but he understands why, and he's more sad about it than anything else.

Next chapter starts season 2! Hooray!

Please please PLEASE comment! Thank you!

5. End of Your Rope

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Suicidal Thoughts & references to self-harm

OCTOBER 30 1984

MIKE WHEELER

Almost one year.

One whole year.

Three hundred and fifty-two days.

You swallow. New Year. New Year meant New You, right?

You would try to do better now.

You thought, maybe, at Rosh Hashanah... And Yom Kippur.

Better person.

Stop hurting yourself.

Stop hurting the people around you.

It isn't good for you or them. You are missing an opportunity to act humanely. You are missing an opportunity to be a better person for yourself and for those around you.

Doing this is hurting Nancy. It is hurting your friends. It is hurting the rest of your family, though you didn't really care much about them. Doing this hurts the party.

God forbid El is still out there and listening, too. Because then you'd be hurting her as well.

And you were coming up on a year, and even though you know everything is fine, you can't help but shake the feeling that maybe

you need to be actually on top of your life for *once*.

You sigh and you pull back your sleeves. You haven't worn short sleeves since the temperature dipped below seventy. Sure, some days you were kind of warm, but overall you've been able to handle it fine.

You think to yourself – it's been a year. You can get better now. You can pull yourself together, now. Right? Right. You can do this. You can do this. You can...

You reach for the razor and you place it against your wrist.

Who are you kidding?

There is no getting over this.

You're just cleaning up when you can hear your mom call "MICHAEL! DINNER!" from downstairs. You sigh, make sure your wrists are covered, and head down.

You are *so* going to hear it for two nights ago...

You sit down at the table and stab at your food, your parents discussing work for the day from both of them. Your mom, a writer for a local magazine column, is discussing how she needs a new typewriter; and your dad, an accountant, had a slow work day because it was that awkward break between tax season and prepping for next tax season.

You think you're going to get off the hook and can just go and sit in your room when suddenly your mom is addressing you.

"After dinner, I want you to pick out your toys for the yard sale."

Oh *great*.

Time to get rid of some of your *really important* material goods.

Only half of that thought is sarcastic. The other half is genuinely upset. But you don't know how to show emotions other than "grumpy" and "dead inside", now, so you don't say much of

anything.

“Fine.”

“Two boxes’ worth,” Mom insists.

What?

“Two boxes?”

“You heard me.”

“I’m fine with you giving away a couple but the other ones have way too much emotional value!” you shout, before you can stop yourself.

So many toys remind you of happier times. Hanging out with your friends before you were all screwed up from last year. Hanging out with Nancy before you both grew up.

Hanging out with El.

“Emotional value?” Mom scoffs.

“They’re hunks of plastic, Michael,” Dad says, his face filled with ham. Mom doesn’t like to eat ham but she makes it for Dad.

One of the many things that makes you mad, really.

“You already took away my Atari!”

A fun moment. You had lost a lot of blood that day, afterwards.

“If you didn’t want to lose more toys, you shouldn’t have stolen from Nancy.”

Oh my *God*.

“I didn’t steal, I borrowed!”

“Oh, and you didn’t curse out Mr. Kowalski last week either, right?”

Since he had been asking you to roll up your sleeves during gym class, yes, yes you absolutely cursed him out.

“Or plagiarize that essay?”

You had gotten distracted that night between the cutting and the crying and the wishing El was back –

“Or graffiti the bathroom stall?”

Okay, this is just ridiculous.

“Everyone graffiti the bathroom stall.”

“So if your friend jumps off a cliff, you’re gonna jump too?”

Cliff.

Jumping.

You don’t say anything as your memories well up.

Pain stabs every corner of you.

You remember going over to the edge.

You remember Dustin being trapped.

You remember feeling like your life was literally spiraling out of control.

You remember thinking this was better than letting them hurt your friend.

Death was okay.

You were okay with Dying.

You were ready to Die.

You’d made your peace with Death.

Death was okay.

Death was okay.

Death was –

“We know you’ve had a hard year, Michael. But we’ve been patient. This isn’t strike one. This isn’t even strike three.”

Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay
Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay –

“It’s strike twenty –“

Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay
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Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay
Death was okay Death was okay –

“You’re on the bench, son.”

Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay
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Death was okay Death was okay Death was okay –

“And if it’d been my coach, you’d be lucky to still be on the team.”

What did that even mean?

“Two boxes. Two.”

You stab at your food more, your brain spiraling, down, down, down
–

Death.

Death is better than this.

Death is better than *all of this*.

Going on like this is just. Not. Going. To. Work. Any. More.

Dinner finishes and you go to your toys. It really, really, really, *really* doesn't matter to you anymore.

You want to get better.

You want to *be* better.

But it's just not going to happen.

Not for you.

Not everyone is that lucky.

You start to put things in boxes. You start with the toys you haven't touched in ages, and move on to more recent ones.

Sitting down here is always painful now, but sometimes it's the good kind of pain, the kind of pain that you would hurt yourself to feel because you feel so, so empty.

Tonight it's the bad kind of pain, the pain you hurt yourself to distract yourself from.

You hold Rory in your hands and the toy roars back at you. You remember showing it to El.

It hurts. It hurts in a bad away. It hurts in a way that even though you want to smile at the toy, you can't bring yourself to.

You put it down, away from the "YARD SALE" box.

You pick up the Millenium Falcon. You remember Dustin trying to get El to make it fly. You want to smile again, but it still hurts too much. Too much.

Everything feels so, so numb. And yet, somehow, also painful. Numb and pain. All over.

You look over at the hideout, swallowing and trying to not cry again.

Maybe you should just sit there.

You put aside the Falcon, because there's no way you're going to give that away, no matter how much it doesn't really matter anymore. Dustin would want it.

Your walkie is still down there from the last time you were here – you hadn't brought it up today. You pull out the antenna and hold it up to your mouth.

“El are you there? El?”

Static.

“It's me. It's Mike.”

“It's day three-hundred and fifty-two. Seven forty p.m.”

You don't always say the time, but sometimes you do just in case she's listening and needs to know.

Even though she probably isn't listening.

No.

She has to be listening.

You can't... give up hope.

Quite yet.

“I'm still here.”

You're here.

Because you're here.

Because... you're here.

Because you're here.

You're here. Because you're here. Because you're here.

Because...

You're here.

And even though it's taking every last bit of your energy to stay here, you stay here.

Because you haven't quite yet given up on her.

Just make it to Halloween.

Make it one more day.

One day at a time. That's what Nancy said once. One day, at a time.

"If you're out there, say something. Or give me a sign."

You know it won't work, but you have to try anyway.

"I won't even say anything. Just... I wanna know if you're okay."

Static.

Nothing.

As always.

"I'm so stupid," you mutter to yourself.

Today's a second session sort of day, you guess.

You get up to go back to your room and hurt yourself again –

"Mike."

!!

"Mike –"

"Hello, is that you?" you shout, before your brain registers –

"Yeah, it's me, Dustin. What're you doing on this channel again?"

Your heart sinks, right, straight – it feels like it drops out of you.

Everything turns numb again.

Numb and pain and loss and loss and loss.

“I’ve been trying to reach you all day. We were right. Max is Mad Max.”

“Yeah, I’m busy.” You snap out as Dustin’s “But –“ fades in.

Hope is the worst thing for you.

You head upstairs to hurt yourself again. You’ll finish packing up the toys later.

Just get to tomorrow.

Just get to tomorrow.

Just get to tomorrow.

Just... get to tomorrow.

OCTOBER 31 1984

You used to be really excited about this costume, but now you just feel *ridiculous*.

Completely, utterly ridiculous.

And your mom is taking *pictures*. Pictures!

This is mortifying.

But getting on your bike and riding with Lucas and Dustin, for a few minutes you feel happy again. This usually happens when you’re with your friends.

See?

Getting to the next day was definitely worth it. You usually find that it is, honestly.

You really need to remember that more.

And it doesn't even matter that Lucas went as Venkman too, because on the inside you're just happy that you're all in these costumes. Because you're doing something with your friends, and your friends are happy with you, and for a brief moment you feel normal again.

Even being bullied because you're all wearing costumes and pretty much no one else is is fine, because it feels normal. It feels *normal*. You aren't being bullied for being the sulky-kid, or – God forbid – having blood on your clothes. Things feel like maybe –

Maybe normal is possible again.

As you trick or treat, though, you realize that normal doesn't just mean – back to before El.

Normal means going back to the *path* you are all supposedly supposed to be on. It means having your friends grow up, and you grow up too.

And part of that means girls.

And part of *that*, means, apparently, Max.

It means Lucas and Dustin fighting over Max, and wanting Max to join the Party –

And your heart clenches. And she joins you trick or treating. And everything shuts down again.

For just a little while there you felt normal again.

But now you can't help but feel like El is...

El is being replaced...

And you can't handle that.

You just can't.

Everything turns numb, and you can't even enjoy going around and getting candy.

Because you don't really... *feel* anything anymore.

You just look in front of you, look into what your future will probably be. And you can just see. You can just see you being left behind. Your friends – perhaps not Will, but the others – moving on and trying to return to being normal, healthy people. Growing up and growing away from you. And Will has his own problems... He was already separate...

They would grow up and away, and you would always be stuck.

Stuck at twelve.

Stuck at the age that all the strings broke inside of you.

So what did trick or treating even matter?

You're so angry that you take it out on Will, even though he doesn't deserve it. And you walk away from him, and the next thing you know –

"Where's Will?"

You run up to Dustin and Lucas and Max, and you shake Dustin, repeating your question.

"Where's Will?"

Dustin frowns, looking around you all.

"I don't see him."

"He probably just went to another house," Max suggests.

You look over at Dustin and Lucas in worry, and you all take off running together, seeing that he dropped his camera and running through the neighborhood to find him –

Until finally you find him, crouched against a wall.

"Will!"

You reach out for him.

“Will, what’s wrong?”

Will looks up at you, clearly shell-shocked and shaking.

“I couldn’t find you – are – are you hurt?”

Will doesn’t say anything. Dustin and Lucas catch up you, both swearing loudly into the night air.

“Is he okay?” Lucas asks.

“I don’t know,” you respond, clenching your teeth and trying to pull him up, “I’m gonna get you home, okay? I’m gonna get you home. Hold on.”

You pull him to his feet and hold onto him.

“I got him – I got him –“ you shout at Dustin as he tries to help you.

“Mike?”

“Keep trick-or-treating. I’m bored anyways,” you say.

Easier to say you’re bored than you’re empty.

You take Will back to your house and you both go to the basement together, Will still not saying much of anything until you both sit on the couch together, pulling out Halloween candy and eating it until he finally starts to talk.

“It’s like... like... I’m stuck,” Will says, looking at his hands.

“Like... like stuck in the Upside Down?” you ask.

“No... you know on a View-Master, when it gets, like...”

“Caught between two slides?”

“Yeah yeah, like that. Like one side’s our world, and the other... The other slide is the Upside Down. And... and there was this noise coming from everywhere. And then I saw something.”

“The Demogorgon?”

“No. It was like this... this huge shadow in the sky. Only... it was alive. And it was coming for me.”

“Is this all real? Or is it like the doctors say, all in your head?”

Your heart is pounding, loudly, in your chest.

Was... something coming?

“I dunno, just... just please don’t tell the others, okay? They won’t understand.”

“Eleven would.”

You say this before you can stop yourself, really.

“She would?”

You nod.

Sometimes it’s nice to talk about her...

“Yeah. She always did. Sometimes I feel like I still see her. Like she’s still around, but... she never is. I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I’m going crazy.”

You finally admit it.

You’ve finally admitted it to someone.

“Me too.”

A warmth spreads throughout you that you haven’t felt in a long, long time.

“Hey well, if we’re both going crazy, then we’ll go crazy together right?”

You need him to agree. You need to feel... not alone.

“Yeah. Crazy together.” He nods, smiling at you.

You smile back.

At least you're not alone anymore.

Will is then picked up by Jonathan, and you go sit in the alcove.

It's time to call El.

And, for once, you don't feel like hurting yourself.

It's... nice.

"It's day three-hundred and fifty-three."

She knows this... if she's listening.

Whatever.

"I had a bad day today."

Not like, the worst day ever?

You have a bad day every day.

"I don't know."

You never do. Not really.

"I... I guess I wish you were here. I mean, we all do. If you're out there, just, please.... Give me a sign."

You're thinking with a clearer head, for once.

Maybe if you remind her you're not the only one missing her...

You feel odd. Everything feels odd.

You feel like someone is in the room with you.

You look up, and swallow. Everything kind of hurts. You feel like you should be crying.

You hear a small whisper. You hear a small whisper of your name. You don't really know where it came from, or even... if it's real...

“Eleven...?”

Nothing happens.

Nothing ever happens.

You swallow the pain welling up, close the walkie, and get up.

You should be going to bed soon, anyway.

N O V E M B E R 1 1 9 8 4

There is nothing you hate more in this world than that damn little pollywog thing. d’Artagnan.

Whatever.

Between interrupting a halfway decent science lesson, to Dustin getting obsessed with it, to it *probably being something from the Upside – fucking – Down*, you couldn’t actually deal with it’s continued existence.

It was obviously from the damn Upside Down. It gave Will the fucking *creeps*, after all. You could see it on his face. And then he told you how he felt about it, and that sealed the fucking deal.

d’Artagnan had to fucking go.

Of course Dustin was difficult about it, but you had to protect Will. You had to stop the Upside Down. You had to keep people safe.

You couldn’t lose someone again, like you had lost Eleven.

Not again.

And if it were to be Will...

Nope. You’re not going to let that happen.

You can’t handle losing someone you care about, *again*.

So you’re chasing after Dart, because you have to find Dart, and you have to stop whatever it is in the Upside Down that is causing trouble

this time.

You're wandering through the hallways, looking everywhere you can, not seeing a sign of the bastard anywhere.

And you feel... odd.

You feel like there's someone... watching you.

The back of your neck bristles. Everything puts you on edge. Whatever this thing is, it's not safe.

You go into the locker room in the gym, trying to breathe slowly. You grab a mop to attack it with.

You repeat your mantra to yourself, the same one you've always had when you're scared, or doing something stupid –

You've made your peace with death.

You've made your peace with death.

You've made your peace with death.

You've made your –

Shit –

A sound –

Hide –

Attack –

"What the hell are you doing?" Max shouts at you.

For *fuck's* sake –

"What are *you* doing?" you shout back, "Why are you in here?"

"I'm looking for *Dart*."

"This is the *boy's* room!"

Can't you have *one second* of peace?

"Yeah, so?"

"So you should GO. HOME."

You can't handle having another person with you all. You can't handle Dustin and Lucas starting to move on.

You just.

You can't handle it.

You have too much damage to let in another to the Party.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

Hah!

"I don't hate you. How can I hate you, I don't even know you."

"Yeah but you don't want me in your Party!"

Fuck right you don't.

"Correct."

"Why not?"

"Because you're *annoying!* Also, we don't need another party member! I'm our paladin, Will's our cleric, Dustin's our bard, Lucas is our ranger, and El's our mage!"

Shit.

You shouldn't have said that.

"El? Who's El?"

"Someone."

Your heart breaks a little.

“No one.”

“Someone or no one?!”

My *God* she is *annoying*!

“She was in our party a long time ago. She moved away, okay?”

Leave me ALONE.

You walk away. You need to get out of there.

“She was a mage?”

Oh come *ON*!

“Well, what could she do? Like magic tricks or something?”

Why was she always on that effing skateboard...

“Well, I could be your zoomer.”

Zoomer?

The fuck?

“That’s not even a real thing!”

“It could be!”

She skates on her board around you, holding her hands up in the air. You are so annoyed, but you also still feel weird, and so every bit of you is on edge.

“See? Zoomer.”

“Mind-blowing.”

Fuck off, Max.

“Come on, you know you’re impressed.”

She must have a different definition of the word than you do.

“I don’t see any tricks. You’re just going around in a circle.”

“If it’s so easy, *you* try it!”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know how!”

Is there any way this conversation could be *more* annoying and agitating and –

Your hairs go up even more on the back of your neck as you watch Max spin around you. You have goosebumps all over your arms, but you’re wearing a sweater inside, so there’s no reason for that to be happening.

“So then you admit it’s kind of impressive.”

“I think if I spent, like, all day practicing, I could do that!”

“I would give you a million bucks if you could!”

“Okay, you’re making me dizzy.”

You really should stop watching her spin around and around and around, but you’re too distracted by... why-ever you... feel like this... to actually look away.

“Please just stop.”

“I’ll stop when I join your party.”

“Come on, just stop!”

“It’s a simple question. Am I in or out?”

You can’t help but smile, even for a second.

And then she falls off of her board.

Shit.

You run to her and help her up, just ‘cause it’s the right thing to do.

“Jesus! Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“What happened?”

“I dunno, it was some kind of magnet just... pulling on my board. I know that sounds crazy.”

Crazy.

Magnet.

Hairs sticking up on your neck.

Feeling.

Off.

Like someone is there.

Someone is there who you haven’t...

You turn and look at the door the gym. No one is there.

But that doesn’t mean someone couldn’t have been.

You sprint, but no one is in the hallway.

You’re acting stupid again.

You’re always stupid.

You go back for your walkie and pick it up. Will finds Dart, and you immediately go to the bathroom.

The lights are flickering, though, and you run faster, as fast as you can, with Max close behind you. Lucas eventually meets up with you, and you reach the bathroom –

Dustin’s already there.

“Where’s Dart?”

“I dunno, not here,” Dustin responds dismissively.

“What?”

Where the fuck –

“He said by Salerno’s, right?” Max asks.

“Yeah, maybe Will has him,” Dustin says.

You realize Will isn’t there.

You remember the flickering lights.

You turn to look at them all, no longer frantically checking the stalls.

“Where... is Will?”

Did Dart *get him*?

Like that *thing* got him last year?

No.

Not again.

You all split up, looking around the school for Will. You head outside, seeing him standing in the middle of the field –

Not responding to anything –

Will, Will no – Not will –

You keep saying his name –

You try shaking him awake –

Panic Panic Panic Panic Panic –

Lucas comes running out to you and you turn to him –

“Get the others!”

Lucas immediately turns around, sprinting back to the school. Soon he comes back out, the others and Will’s mom following him closely.

You keep repeating Will’s name –

“I just found him like this!” you shout towards Mrs. Byers, “I think he’s having another episode!”

Mrs. Byers runs up to him and holds him by the shoulders, having that panicked look on her face you were *so used to* this time last year.

“Will? Will? Will! Sweetie, wake up! It’s Mom! Will!”

His eyes are moving so fast under his eyelids you feel sick to your stomach, and he keeps twitching, and he won’t respond to Mrs. Byers, and you feel sicker and sicker and you’re so so so worried and everything is spinning everything is spinning everything is spinning spinning spinning –

Will –

Not Will –

Not *again!*

And then his eyes open up and he gasps for breath as though he’s been choking since you found him.

“M... Mom?” Will gasps quietly. Mrs. Byers immediately grabs him and pulls him away, leading him back through the school. You, Dustin, Lucas, and unfortunately Max follow after them, your heart pounding so loudly in your throat you can’t think straight anymore.

“Two episodes in two days,” Lucas says softly.

“It’s getting worse,” you respond. You’re ignoring Max, because *she isn’t a part of this*.

“You think it’s true sight?” Lucas asks.

Max is still asking questions.

You get Lucas to stop talking.

This was too dire for stupid crushes.

You're so distracted that night that you can't really do your usual routine. Instead of cutting yourself open to let out the pain, and calling El to just *try* and reach her, you sit, and you think, and you try to figure out –

What is happening to Will?

Notes for the Chapter:

So fUN FACT, I meant for this chapter to be ALL of season two from Mike's point of view. And, as you can see, it got to be very long only halfway through.

So you get two chapters to make up for the lack of update yesterday. I know it's two Mikes in a row, but honestly, it would disrupt the narrative flow to split 'em up (and you'd have to wait for me to write Jane's POV of season two, which, now you have to do anyway, but like, hopefully it won't take as long. Yay, transcripts).

And then we go on to new material! And the snow ball. But that's such a small fraction it doesn't matter.

PLEASE COMMENT on both this chapter and the next because, like, they're different? Yeah. Thank you all for the comments so far :)

6. Burn it all Down

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for some violence and mentions of self-harm

N O V E M B E R 3 1 9 8 4

M I K E W H E E L E R

Everything is going about as bad as you could have expected.

You can't find Hopper.

Will is sick. Really, really, really sick, and avoiding warmth, and sweating, and drawing –

So much drawing –

The now memories are *all the time*, now –

And you want to see the bright side of this but even as you told Will that he was a spy now you didn't really believe it yourself, you just wanted to make Will feel better because you care about Will and you don't want to see him hurt and everything is just –

Not –

Not again –

Please –

Please not again –

But you hate yourself because there's this part of you that just.

Is glad to be back in the thick of the chaos.

You're glad that things feel dire again, because it reminds you...

It reminds you of the last time you felt *normal*.

And maybe... maybe you've been itching for this the whole year without really knowing.

But these thoughts weren't really helpful for anyone, so you didn't indulge them, really.

Luckily it is Saturday, and your mom doesn't *always* get mad at you for missing Shabbat, even though man you need a day of rest right now to deal with all of this but whatever, so the night before you had just stayed over at Will's place to keep an eye on him with Mrs. Byers. You'd have to tell Dustin and Lucas about this eventually, but your mind is spinning all over the place –

And you haven't called El in days –

And you haven't hurt yourself in days –

So you can feel your pain, bubbling at the surface, waiting to come out, and at any moment you are going to break –

But you have to help Hopper.

You *have* to.

Mrs. Byers is running about the house, trying to figure out where to place the latest drawing, and you help, and you find the junction –

“Okay So... so Hopper is here?”

“Yeah, now we just need to find out where *here* is – right?”

“Right –“

“Did he say anything? Before he left?”

“Something... something about... vines?”

You run to the window as a car picks up – it's not Hopper – it's *Bob* –

Mrs. Byers goes out to him –

You're fidgeting in the house, waiting, but then Bob comes in with Mrs. Byers and...

*What is she **doing**?*

“We need you to help us figure out –“

Oh.

Brilliant.

He resists at first, but then – he starts figuring it out, running around the house and naming some of the shapes.

You fidget and fidget and fidget and fidget as he walks around the rooms, looking at them all –

“It’s a map of Hawkins!”

Well shit.

You help to measure the distances, trying to figure out exactly where everything is, to figure out the scale –

But everything is on a time limit –

“It’s hard, the ratio isn’t exactly one-to one – I mean, if you’re twisting my arm – and you are twisting my arm – I would say that the X is... maybe... a half mile southeast of Danford?” Bob says.

Mrs. Byers takes the map, and you all run out of the house, heading into the car and driving off.

You never really thought Bob would be a part of this, but chaos was apparently the name of this year’s game.

Bob and Mrs. Byers are arguing and arguing and arguing over where to go, and then suddenly Will shouts –

“TURN RIGHT –“

“What?”

“I saw him.”

“Where?”

“Not here. In my now-memories.”

“In your – what?” Bob asks, but Mrs. Byers and Will are too single minded and you are too overwhelmed –

“TURN RIGHT!”

She swerves, and you’re driving too fast, and you run into a sign, and you almost hit the cop car –

You breathe out “Superspy,” and now you’re even starting to believe it yourself...

They leave the car and you’re stuck in it, and you hate feeling trapped and lost and useless – you need something – need – need – need –

“They’re going to get hurt,” Will whispers, “Mom’s going to get –“

“Will you need to breathe,” you say back, “Will just – just – just breathe – “

Your needs don’t matter –

Just help Will –

“We need to get out of the car.”

You nod, and the two of you leave, walking cautiously over the ground. You turn to him, your heart pounding in your chest.

“Do you see anything? In your now-memories?”

He shakes his head.

A car appears over the hill –

What was happening *now*?

A man leaves the car and walks over to you. You don’t recognize him, but Will seems to.

“What are you boys doing out here?”

“Chief Hopper is stuck down there and so is my mom and so is Bob –“
Will rambles

“Alright men – go – let’s go get them – go down go down go down now!” the man says, and they send soldiers – so many soldiers and men dressed in white suits like they were working with bad chemicals – down into the caverns.

You stay with Will, who is panicking and breathing heavily, as they all descend, and you squeeze your eyes tightly and try to block out all the thoughts and feelings and *panic* and *pain* –

Will doubles over to the ground –

“Will? What’s wrong?”

He’s writhing and wiggling and freaking out freaking out freaking out freaking out –

He lies back in the ground, stiff as a board, and screams so loudly you’re reminded –

El screaming as she sent the Demogorgon back –

El screaming that loud and disappearing from the world –

Oh God –

Oh God –

Oh God –

Oh God –

Not again.

Everything from that point on is flashes and chaos and hospitals and too many things happening literally all at once for you to actually comprehend.

All you know is that you have to help Will.

You can’t lose Will, too.

NOVEMBER 4 1984

This is.

Officially.

The longest day of your life.

The worst is still November 12, 1983, but *damn*.

This has officially beaten it in the length category.

Will remembers nothing. Will isn't... *Will* anymore.

You lost Will, and you didn't even know you were losing him.

And you hate being in the place that was the entire reason for all of this and the reason you lost El and the reason El was tortured her whole life and the reason that El couldn't come back if she was alive and the reason El is dead if she is dead and you hate you hate you hate you hate this FUCKING PLACE

You're so agitated, you can't sit still. You look around the hospital room and manage to find a scalpel.

You need to –

You need to –

You need to –

“Mike?”

You look over at the... not-Will.

You're waiting to see if they can take down the monster.

“What are you doing?”

Will is acting the most like himself he has acted all day.

You drop the scalpel, and say nothing.

“Mike?”

“Nothing, Will. Just rest.”

“Is this why you have those scars on your arms?”

You look over at Will and swallow.

“Wh... what? What are you talking about?”

“We all noticed them, Mike. We just didn’t want to talk about it if you didn’t want to.”

You glare, “It’s nothing.”

Will shrugs, looking away.

He drops it.

Now *that* isn’t like Will at all.

You watch Will as you sit around, tense, waiting to hear back from the soldiers. He’s staring out into space, and he’s tense, and he’s sweating.

You take the scalpel while he’s not looking and retreat into the bathroom. You sit, you expose your thighs – because apparently your wrists aren’t hidden enough – and you cut and you cut and you cut and you cut and you cut –

You’re bleeding –

You breathe in slowly, wrap your leg up with some bandages that you took from the counter, and go back out into the room.

Mrs. Byers has returned now, and you sit with her and with Bob and with Will in silence.

Everything in you is tense.

It’s weird, doing that again and so much after you haven’t in so long.

It’s the waiting that got to you, really.

The sitting around and not being able to do anything.

It's always too much and your brain starts to spin and you need to release yourself from the pain and if only El was here.

El would know what to do.

You stare out into space for a while, before turning to Will and seeing that he's crying –

Or...

Trying to cry?

"I'm... I'm... I'm sorry."

"What? What do you mean, sweetie?" Mrs. Byers asks.

But you know it.

You know what's about to happen.

"He made me do it."

"Who? Who made you do what?"

"I told you. They upset him. They shouldn't have done that. They shouldn't have upset him."

You scream, and run out back into the hall –

They're all going to die –

You're all going to die –

And while *you've* made your peace with death –

You aren't okay with Will dying

Or Chief dying

Or Mrs. Byers dying

Or, fuck, even Bob dying –

“I need to get through! It’s a trap! It’s a trap! I need to warn them it’s a trap –“

As you shout Bob holds you back, but you writhe and shout and try to get away because *oh my God we’re all going to die you can’t let them die you can’t let them all DIE*

A chill goes over you

You keep screaming

But there’s a chill going over you and you can’t help but feel like you’re being watched again –

If only El was here –

You need El –

You always need El but now was... Now you especially do.

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck Fuck –

FUCK –

“LET ME GO! LET ME GO! LET ME GO! IT’S A TRAP! IT’S A TRAP – I NEED TO WARN THEM –“ you scream.

“Mike, Mike, what’s going on – you need to calm down – Mike – “

The words of Bob barely register in your ears.

You briefly got bogged down in yourself –

Stupid selfish idiot –

But now you need to save everyone –

You need to –

You need to –

It's a trap –

It's a trap –

It's a trap –

Alarms blare throughout the building.

It's too late.

“What the hell?” Bob whispers. You look at him and swallow.

“We're too late.”

“What –“

“WE'RE TOO LATE!”

You run back towards the room and barge in, looking at Mrs. Byers – who is frazzled beyond belief – and Will – who is still sick and not *Will* anymore.

“What's going on?”

“We're under attack,” you say, your heart in your throat and your leg stinging like a *bitch* but you don't have time to worry about that right now –

You search around the room frantically for the drugs they gave Will to make him go to sleep when he got here – you find them and you turn to Mrs. Byers –

“We need to make Will sleep.”

“What?”

“He's a spy. If he knows where we are, so does the shadow monster

—“

“He’s lying!” Will screams, but he doesn’t sound like Will anymore.

“He killed those soldiers, he’ll kill us too!”

“He’s lying! He’s lying! He’s lying! He’s lying! He’s LYING!”

This isn’t Will.

This is the monster that took Will.

This is the monster that took Will away from you.

And God Dammit, you were going to *kill whatever took Will away from you*.

Guns and screams of monsters ring through the halls and suddenly you’re not here anymore, you’re in November 12th, 1983, and you seize up –

Not again –

Not again –

Not *again* –

NOT AGAIN –

“Those are gunshots!” Bob shouts, pulling you out of your... flashback.

It’s a flashback.

And Will is shouting, and Mrs. Byers is trying to see if he’s still Will, and everything is too much, and you just want to keep Will – the ghost of Will – the shell of Will – whatever – *alive* – and –

Mrs. Byers is injecting him –

You hold your hands over your ears because the sound of what sounds like Will screaming and all the other sounds are literally going to make you break down any second –

If you haven't broken down already –

And then he's asleep, and the door is opening, and Hop is here, and so is that doctor, and you can hear the Monsters coming –

You run behind them all and people are dying and guns are going off everywhere and the monsters are everywhere and you can't breathe anymore and everyone's dying everyone's dying everyone's dying it's –

It's -

The power's off.

You failed.

You've let everyone down.

And now you're doomed too.

"We need to get out of here," Hop says.

"How?" you scream, "Fuck – *how?*"

The doctor shuffles around the room and pulls out a map, putting it down as Hop holds up a flashlight.

"Look, this is us, and this is the nearest exit," the doctor says, circling places on the map, "But even if we somehow make it there, there's no way out."

"What do you mean?" Hop asks.

"The locks are fail secure."

"Fail secure?" Mrs. Byers says.

"If there's a power outage – the building goes on full lockdown."

"Can it be unlocked remotely?" Bob asks.

"With a computer, sure, but somebody's gotta reset the breakers –"

“Where are the breakers?” Hop is already taking point, and for some reason you’re *glad* there are adults here to figure this out, because you’re so overwhelmed right now you probably would jump off the building if you let your thoughts and spirals win –

“Breakers are in the basement, three floors down.”

Hop grabs the map and starts walking out, but Bob calls him back, “Hey, where are you going?”

“To reset the breakers,” Hop snaps.

“Okay, then what?”

Bob what the fuck?

“Then we get the hell out of here.”

“No, then the power comes back on. If you wanna unlock the doors, you have to completely reboot the computer system, and then override the security codes with a manual input.”

“Fine... how do I do that?” Hop asks.

Fuck.

“You can’t. Not unless you know BASIC.”

“I don’t know what that means –“

You’ve never heard Hop sound this scared before.

And of course he doesn’t know what BASIC is.

“It’s a computer programming language,” you say, your heart still in your ears.

“Teach it to me,” Hop demands.

Oh my *God*.

“Shall I teach you French while I’m at it, Jim?” Bob scoffs, “How about a little German?” He turns around to face the doctor, “How

about you, Doc? You speak BASIC?"

The doc looks like he's going to answer yes, before shaking his head and bowing it, "No."

"Okay. I got this. I got this." Bob says.

Mrs. Byers is losing it, and you can't watch, because seeing them say goodbye – probably – is making you flash back again – and it all hurts too much –

So you wait, and you sit next to sleeping Will, and you start to pray.

You don't pray much, if at all.

Frankly, you don't know if you even believe in God. Not that you ever really knew, mind, but you're more doubtful now than ever before.

But God dammit if you're not going to find comfort in the words of your people through the millennia – of the (modified for one person) Mourner's Kaddish – for all those who have died now – or the Mi shebeirach – for Will –

And the Sh'ma.

Because you have a funny feeling you're finally about to die.

And you pray, and you pray, and you pray, and you're praying silently, because you don't really want the Chief or Mrs. Byers or the doctor to hear you, but you *need* these words right now, because they connect you to the tribe over thousands and thousands of years, and you've always survived, your people have always survived, and even when they don't...

You're still a people.

The power goes back on, and you stop praying. Your heart is in your throat, and you watch and you wait while Bob types away at the computer.

And the doors are open.

And you didn't know what relief really felt like until now.

And he even clears the stairs of those monsters –

Thank God for Bob

Thank. God. For. Bob.

And you manage to make it outside the building, and you know Mrs. Byers and Hop are waiting for Bob, so you sit with Will outside the building, and you go back to praying, because you have a lot of Kaddish to recite (both the modified version, and at Shabbat if you make it out of this), and you haven't cared this much about being Jewish in almost a year – you had to fake it so hard for your Bar Mitzvah – but now you're here, and you're praying, because you seriously don't know what else to do.

All of a sudden there are the sounds of guns outside the door, and you turn and you see that Hop is dragging Mrs. Byers outside of the building, and Bob isn't with them, and you're dragging Will and you're getting out of there and –

Bob is dead –

And there's a car with Jonathan and *Nancy* (wait where the fuck has Nancy been this whole time) pulling up and you drive to Hop's car and you drive the fuck out of there and you pick up Dustin and Lucas and Max and Steve and why the fuck is *Max* there and –

And –

And –

This is too much.

Just too much.

Always too much.

NOVEMBER 5 1984

Well.

This plan backfired spectacularly.

You thought that hiding Will away in the shed and keeping him unaware of where he was would work, and you all could just. Use him. To try and get the Mind Flayer.

And honestly, once you figured out the Morse Code, it *worked*.

It actually *worked*.

You had to Close the Gate to the Upside Down.

Which, in retrospect, seems pretty obvious.

But then the phone rang.

And it was time for you to get ready to die again, really.

You had come to terms with the fact that El was probably dead – after all, how could she have survived this long on her own, whether on Earth or in the Upside Down? – and you were ready to meet her, maybe. If there was some sort of After Life, after all.

You ran out to the house again, and you hid Will away, and you needed to be ready to fight. Because you would protect the people you loved until you couldn't do it anymore.

Monsters had been screaming over the hills.

And now you're standing there, with the rest of the Party –

Because this *is* the Party –

Minus El –

And your sister has a *gun*

And Steve has his bat

And Hop has a *ridiculous* gun

And Lucas has his wrist rocket

And you have... a candlestick.

Because, honestly?

Fuck it.

You're not going down without a fight.

Your whole life this past year has *been* a fight.

And you've earned the right to try to protect the people around you.

Whether it's Nancy – though she doesn't seem to need protection – or Dustin, or Lucas, or Will, yes, even Will –

You will protect them till you go the way of Bob, and probably, El.

You hear the monsters.

You scream and you watch them as they surround the house.

And you're ready, but they don't come in. They don't attack.

The hairs on the back of your neck stick up again.

Something's out there.

You scream as a monster breaks through the window and lands, dead, on the floor – what the – what the – what the –

Your heart is in your throat again but not for the reasons it has been, this past day...

And the door is opening...

What is this...

It's opening on its *own*..

What...

What...

What...

You look.

Your heart stops.

Your *breathing* stops.

It's El.

It's El.

It's El.

It's El.

And she's alive

And your heart is pounding again, and you're breathing again, and you can't think, you're just –

El is alive.

El is *alive*.

El is *alive!*

And she's looking at you with blood coming from her nose and you are going to start crying if you're not careful and suddenly you have more hope inside of you than you've had for ages and oh my God, oh my God, oh my God?

It's El

It's El

It's *El*

You walk up to her, and she walks up to you, and you whisper, "Eleven," and she whispers "Mike"

And everything shatters

All of your walls from the past year shatter

And you reach out and you hold her tighter in your arms than you've ever held anyone before, really, and all you can think of is that you're never ever ever *ever* letting go of her, ever again, and you're going to cling to her with all of your strength and never let her out of your sight and never let her go –

El

El

And she's warm and she's small and she's soft and you don't even care that she looks like she stepped out of some place you're too young to have conceived of and she smells so wonderful and you can *remember what she smells like now* –

You have to tell her.

You pull back and you look into her beautiful, amazing brown eyes and you say it –

"I never gave up on you. I called you ever night. Every night for –"

"Three-hundred and fifty-three days," El whispers.

Your heart crunches in on itself again.

How does she know?

"I heard."

What?

"Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?"

You needed to know.

You *needed* to know.

And everything hurts, and how much did she *see*, how much *did she know*, and how much did she let you suffer without –

“Because I wouldn’t let her,” Hop says, and you turn in confusion as El turns towards the Chief as though she *really* knows him, as though –

“The hell is this? Where have you been?” Hop asks.

“Where have *you* been?” El insists. And they’re hugging.

And it all clicks into place.

Where El has been for the past year. Why she couldn’t talk to you. Why you sometimes felt like she was there – but she said nothing. Why...

Why once Nancy knew to come and check on you as you practically bled out on the floor of your bedroom.

“You’ve been hiding her,” you shout, anger rising to the surface, your body turning to flame –

“You’ve been hiding her this whole *TIME!*” you scream and hit him, and he holds you back, and he drags you away from her even though, God, God you don’t want to leave her right now –

“I was protecting her!” Hop shouts as he pulls you into another room.

“Protecting her! *Protecting* her?” you scream in response.

“Listen, *Listen* to me! The more people know about her, the more danger she’s in,” Hop explains, as though it’s obvious, and maybe it is, but –

“And the more danger you and your family are in – “

“So – what – so I should be *thanking* you?” you scream.

Thanking you that you’ve spent this past year in *complete and utter agony*?

“I’m not asking you to thank me! I’m asking you to try to understand!” Hop shouts.

“I DON’T! I DON’T UNDERSTAND!”

“That’s fine – That’s fine! Just do not blame *her*, all right? She’s upset enough as it *is*.”

“I DON’T BLAME HER! I BLAME YOU! I BLAME *YOU!*”

“That’s okay, kid. That’s okay.”

“NO! NOTHING ABOUT THIS IS OKAY! NOTHING ABOUT THIS IS *OKAY!*”

You hit him, and you don’t care that you shouldn’t, because you are *broken*, and no El couldn’t fix that, but she could have *helped*, you could have been broken *less*, and this was *all his fault* –

“Woah, Jeez – “

“You’re a STUPID, DISGUSTING, LYING PIECE OF *SHIT!*”

“Okay, all right! Stop it!”

“LIAR! LIAR! LIAR!”

He pulls you into a hug, and stops you from hitting him anymore –

You start to break down again –

“Stop it, it’s okay,” he insists.

But it’s not.

Nothing is okay.

Nothing has been okay for a year.

You break down crying as you just keep shouting Liar, because he *is*, but you’re a liar too.

You’ve been lying to yourself.

Pretending that you could go on like this.

But you can't.

You just can't.

"You're okay, kid. You're okay."

No you're not.

And you probably never will be again.

"I'm sorry, kid."

But you don't really have the ability to respond.

You cry for a while – a long while – before you pull back from Hop.

"I've been hurting," you croak out, before you can stop yourself.

"I know, kid –"

"No, *listen*. I've been hurting. And I don't know how much El has told you –"

"She... didn't tell me much, no. I remember when I had to call your sister, but –"

You pull back your sleeves and show him the scars that line both of your inner arms, red and ugly and reminders of every drop you've spilled over the past year. Hopper's mouth drops open before he can stop himself. You then pull up you pant leg – hitch it all the way up – and show the similar, though fewer in number, scars along your thigh, and the tight bandage wound around your thigh that shows signs of bleeding through.

"You did this... to yourself... on purpose?"

You look up at him, rolling everything back down, "Yes."

Hopper is silent.

And you are silent.

"*Why?* Because of –"

“Not just because of her.”

“Kid –“

“Look. Look. I... it’s because of everything. It’s because of everything. I... everything in me broke, okay? I broke apart and I realized how shitty *everything in the world is* and I lost all hope and I broke,” you whisper, the words coming out of you so hoarse you can’t comprehend them, really, “And I need you to know that you didn’t protect me one bit.”

Hop sighs.

“Do you really think she could have saved you? Really?”

“No. Not at all. But at least I would have had her around.”

Hop sighs again.

“We don’t have time for this right now.”

“No, we don’t.”

You stare at each other for a long time.

“You need a counselor –“

“Fuck if I –“

“You need a therapist, or a counselor, or someone, and you need to be open with them, and I’ll help you find someone, but fuck, kid, you can’t keep going on like this.”

“I know,” you whisper. Hop nods, and you both leave the room finally.

You rush back into the living room and see El there, waiting for you both with the rest of the Party. You rush to her side and grab her hand before you can stop yourself, wanting to feel the warmth of it in yours.

She reaches up your arm and rubs the scars there, tears welling up in

her eyes as she looks at you. You look back at her and swallow, but she doesn't say anything.

"I have to close the gate," she says, looking at Hopper as everyone looked at all of you. You pull back from her, letting her stand on her own, your mind still spinning even though you're able to see through the fog a little bit at least.

"It's not like it was before. It's grown," Hopper protests, "A lot. And, I mean, that's considering we can get in there. The place is crawling with those... dogs."

"Demo-dogs," Dustin corrects.

"I'm sorry, what?" Hopper is clearly drained and shaken from what you had shown him, but honestly you don't care.

"I said, uh, Demo-dogs. Like Demogorgon and... dogs. Like, you put them together, it sounds pretty badass..."

"How is this *important* right now?"

"It's not, I'm sorry –"

"I can do it," El whispers.

Please don't, El.

Please don't.

"You're not hearing me," Hopper protests.

"I'm hearing you. I can do it," El insists.

"Even if El can, there's still another problem," you interject, your heart in your throat – but you have to help. If El was going to do this, you *have* to help.

"If the brain dies, the body dies."

"I thought that was the whole point?" Max asks.

"It is, but if we're really right about this... I mean, if El closes the

gate and kills the mind flayer's army –“

“Will's a part of that army,” Lucas realizes.

“Closing the gate will kill him,” you say, looking at everyone in terror.

Mrs. Byers gets up in a daze, going to the room with Will. Everyone follows, and you find El's hand in the crowd again, and she holds yours, and she doesn't touch your scars this time, she just holds your hand, and you want to kiss her, you want to beg her not to go, but you can't –

“He likes it cold...”

“What?”

“That's what Will kept saying to me. He likes it cold... We keep giving it what it wants!”

“If... this is a virus, and Will's the host, then...” Nancy whispers.

“Then we need to make the host uninhabitable,” Jonathan finishes.

“So if he likes it cold...” Nancy continues.

“We need to burn it out of him,” Mrs. Byers snarls.

“We have to do it somewhere he *doesn't* know this time,” you remind them all, strengthened by El's hand in yours –

“Yeah, somewhere far away,” Dustin agrees.

Hopper looks at you all, and looks over at El, and mutters, “The cabin.”

“The cabin?” Mrs. Byers asks.

“Where I hid El this year,” Hopper says, “Jonathan, Joyce –“

They wrap up Will and carry him out to a car, El looking at you nervously. You don't say much of anything as Nancy goes out to help Steve gather warming materials from the yard. In fact, you all sit in

silence, until suddenly Nancy's come back into the house, walking up to you. She holds you by the shoulders, looking at you and biting her lip.

"Mike, I'm going to go with them –"

"No –"

"I have to be there for Jonathan. Steve will stay here with you all."

"But –"

"I have to. I love you."

"I love you," you say to her, and you hug her and she leaves.

You wish you were brave enough to say it to El.

But you're not.

Hopper walks inside now and he nods at El, and she makes her way to the porch and you have to follow her –

"Just be careful, okay? I can't lose you again."

You're facing her, and you're looking into her eyes, and she has dark makeup *everywhere*, but you like it, and she's looking up at you and she's so beautiful and perfect and –

"You won't lose me."

"Do you promise?" you ask, as tears fall from your eyes without permission.

"Promise," she whispers.

And she's leaning up towards you, and now your heart is in your throat again, and you can see the tears on her eyelashes and the staining of makeup on her lips and the way her lips have parted already and you can feel her breath on your face and oh man, oh man, oh man, oh man –

"El... Come on. Let's go. It's time."

Fucking *hell*, Hopper!

She turns back to you, looking at you so desperately you want to just run away with her right then, but you don't.

"Okay," you whisper. And she nods again.

You have to fix this.

You *all* have to fix this.

And she walks away, and they all leave.

And you watch your sister and your... your El leave with your heart clenched in your chest as tightly as it could be, really.

Please be safe, El.

Please.

And you can't stop thinking about how this might be the last time you see her, ever.

So you turn back into the house and you pace until you can't think anymore.

And you know Lucas is annoyed with you but honestly you couldn't care less.

"Mike, would you just *stop* already?"

"You weren't *in there*, okay, Lucas? That lab is *swarming* with hundreds of those dogs –"

"Demo-Dogs!"

Really Dustin?

"The chief will take care of her!" Lucas insists.

"Like she needs protection," Max mutters.

Steve walks over, and you don't *mind* him, much, he was kind with

Nancy and he reassured you about El sometimes after Nancy had told him about El and he wasn't a bad guy but he was *totally going to do a sports metaphor* –

"Listen, dude, a coach calls a play in a game, bottom line, you execute it. All right?"

For *fuck's* sake.

"Okay, first of all, this isn't some stupid sports game. And second, we're not even in the game. We're on the *bench*."

Steve is thrown off by that.

Good.

Fuck.

"Right, so – so my point is –"

Steve falters for a little while longer while, somewhere deep inside, a feeling of *slight* satisfaction overcomes you.

"Right, yeah, we're on the bench, so, uh, there's nothing we can do."

"That's... not entirely true. I mean, these Demo-dogs, they have a hive mind," Dustin interjects, "When they ran away from the bus, they were called away."

"So if we get their attention..." Lucas says.

"Maybe we can draw them away from the lab," Max finishes.

"And clear a path to the gate," you agree.

"Yeah, and then *WE ALL DIE!*" Steve shouts.

"Yeah that's one point of view –" Dustin mutters.

"No, that's not a *point of view*, man, that's a *fact*," Steve sounds as exasperated as your mom when you refuse to dress nice for the seder meal with your extended family.

But you're thinking, and you realize –

“I got it –“

You rush to the junction –

“This is where the chief dug his hole. This is our way into the tunnel. So... Here, right here – this is like a hub – so you got all of the tunnels feed into here?” you show on the map, “Maybe if we set this on *fire* –“

“Oh, yeah, that's a *no* –“ Steve shouts.

“The mind flayer would call his army!” Dustin agrees.

“They'd all come to stop us –“

“Then we circle back to the exit –“

“Guys –“

“By the time they realize we're gone –“

“Hey –“

“El would be at the gate!”

“Hey! Hey Hey Hey! This is *not happening!*”

You all look at Steve.

“But –“

“No no no no no! No buts! I promised I'd keep you shitheads *safe*, and that's *exactly* what I plan on doing. We're *staying here*, on the bench, and we're waiting for the starting team to *do their job*. Does everybody understand?”

“This isn't a stupid *sports game!*” you shout.

“I SAID DOES EVERYBODY UNDERSTAND THAT?” Steve roars, and now you're *really* reminded of Mom.

“I need a *yes*.”

A car sounds from the driveway.

What the *fuck now*?

Max runs to the window and looks out, whispering, “It’s my brother.”

“He – he can’t know I’m here. He’ll kill me. He’ll kill *us*.”

You look over at Steve, who has a facial expression of complete determination on his face.

“Alright, shitheads, fucking *stay inside*, and stay away from the window,” Steve hisses. You all move away from it as Steve heads outside.

“Why will your brother kill us?” you whisper.

“Because he’s a racist, antisemitic douchebag who will kill Lucas and then you, idiot,” Max hisses, “And then kill me for hanging out with you all.”

“Fuck,” Dusi groans.

“We can’t just trust that Steve will keep him away – we have to watch –” Lucas whispers.

You all creep to the window and watch outside, until you see Billy point at you, and you all drop away in a panic.

“Shit! Did he see us?” Dustin groans.

But the door is already opening.

Lucas and Max are standing in the front, and you watch in horror as Billy walks up towards them, a complete caricature of *awfulness*.

“Well well well. Lucas Sinclair, what a surprise.”

He approaches Lucas menacingly, and you want to fight him but you know he’d pound you in a second and your feet are literally glued to the floor –

"I thought I told you to stay away from him, Max," Billy says.

"Billy, go away –"

"You disobeyed me."

"And you know what happens when you disobey me.

"Billy –"

"I break things," Billy says, and he grabs Lucas by the collar and you're shouting, and *shit*, fucking *shit* – *shit shit shit shit* –

"Since Maxine won't listen to me, maybe you will," Billy hisses at Lucas, "You stay *away from her*. STAY. AWAY FROM HER. You hear me?"

Lucas looks at Billy for another moment, before shouting, "I SAID GET OFF ME" and kneeling him in the balls.

"You are *so dead*, Sinclair! You're dead!"

But then Steve walks by you all, turns Billy around, and mutters, "No. You are."

And then Steve punches Billy in the face.

Lucas runs back to you all and you hold him, looking at Billy in terror – and who knows if Steve can –

Billy is such a *douchebag*.

You can't *believe* you ever thought that Steve was one, really. The difference between them was *literally palpable*.

And they're fighting, and you cheer them on, because *fuck Billy*, and Billy is –

Billy is knocking the shit out of Steve, and throwing him all around the house, and he's punching him over and over again, and –

And Max has grabbed the sleeping medicine –

And she's stabbing Billy in the neck with it –

And Billy is falling to the floor –

And Max is threatening him with the spike club –

Holy

Fucking

Shit

And Billy agrees to leave you all alone as he passes out –

And Max grabs his keys, and looks at you all, and you gear up to go –

It's time to go.

It's time to help El.

"Wait, wait, what do we do about Steve?" Lucas asks.

"We leave him behind?" you say in annoyance, "He doesn't want us to go. He'll freak out."

"Yeah, but he can help, and honestly I don't want to leave him alone like this with those Demo-dogs out there. Let's bring him along. He'll be cool, I promise," Dustin insists.

You all look at each other and you finally shrug, "Fine. Max, do you know how to drive?"

"I drove once in a parking lot. It counts," Max answers.

"Good enough for me," Lucas grins.

"Let's go," you nod, and you all head out, dragging Steve's unconscious body to the car. You sit next to him, looking in front of you nervously, but you're going to do this, you're going to help El –

Max was ridiculous at driving.

This was much, much, *much* too fast.

After a while, you hear a small voice mumble, “Nancy?”

You look down to see Steve waking up.

There was absolutely nothing creepy about this moment. Nope. Nothing at all. Nothing creepy about the fact that your sister’s... ex? ... thought that you were her. Nope.

And he’s reacting about as well as you expected him to.

But, you manage to get there in one piece. Somehow.

So you journey through the tunnels, Steve leading the way with you, running through and across all the vines and in the weird Upside-Down dust, and you just. You can feel El’s life on the line. Your line.

So you keep moving.

And though you worry about Dustin getting some dust in his mouth, you try not to think about it.

One problem at a time.

“All right, Wheeler. I think we found your hub,” Steve says.

You look around, at all the tunnels leading in together, and you breathe with relief.

You can do this.

You can do this.

You can do this.

“Drench it,” you say, and you all head out with the gasoline, covering every inch of the hub with the shit, with hoses and gallons and jugs and everything.

It was time to burn this stupid fucker down.

You all move back from it, back to the tunnel you came from.

“You guys ready?” Steve asks.

Everyone answers in agreement.

“Light her up,” Dustin says.

Steve takes the lighter and looks at the gasoline-drenched hellscape.

“I am in such deep shit,” he mutters.

And he throws the lighter.

And all the vines go up in horrifying flames that writhe and twist and scream so loudly you feel like your ears could be bleeding.

And you all run as fast as you possibly can to get out of those damn tunnels.

Run

Run

Run

Run

Run

Run

Run

Run

Run

Run

But then you trip

A vine has grabbed you

Shit

Fuck

You can't die

You can't die

You have to be there for El

She promised you but honestly you should have promised her too

Shit

Shit

Shit

Everyone's pulling you back, and Steve is smashing the vine with his club, and you think you're okay but you turn around and there's a fucking Demo-Dog –

“Dart?” Dustin asks.

Oh for the love of *fuck* –

Dustin inches forward, like an idiot, but he asks for trust, and he pulls off his mask and his goggles, and the Demo-Dog hasn't killed him yet – though it snarls –

And he's feeding him fucking *three musketeers* –

But the Demo-Dog is responding, and eating the chocolate –

And you all manage to sneak past Dart, and keep going through the tunnels.

“Okay,” you mutter as you go.

“Okay?” Dustin asks.

“Maybe I was the idiot, rather than you.”

Dustin laughs, and you keep going through the tunnels, running as fast as you can as they start to rumble around you – the monsters were coming – you run as fast as you can towards the opening – Steve pushes Max out, and then Lucas, and then you, but he and

Dustin are still down there, but the monsters –

Just – run –

Past him and Steve –

“Eleven,” you whisper.

She’s doing it.

She’s closing the gate.

They were all going back.

The other two come up, and as you all walk on the surface again, the lights for the car glow so bright –

El –

El –

El –

You hope, so much, that she’s okay.

And, for now, that’s all you can do.

Notes for the Chapter:

WELL YAY, Mike & El are reunited! That scene in the show gives me all the feels ngl.

I’ll get on the Jane POV ASAP and post it, probably again in two chapters. And then we get new stuff! Hooray!

Please comment, thanks :)

7. Losing your Home

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for allusions to self-harm, as well as childhood physical & sexual abuse.

OCTOBER 31 1984

JANE IVES

If you play your cards right –

That was a phrase you learned from TV –

Maybe you'll see Mike today.

Maybe.

That is the goal, after all.

He's been planning on being a Ghost-Buster for *ages*, and being a ghost is... perfect?

Perfect.

You don't know what a Ghost-Buster is, but you know that if you dress as a Ghost, maybe he'd... bust you?

You go to your dictionary and flip through it. Buster. Someone who breaks something apart.

Well, if you are really a Ghost –

Which you suspect, sometimes –

You wouldn't mind that, really.

Anyway.

Today's the day.

You are going to go and see Mike and you are just. You're going to do it. Today is the day. Today is the day. Today is the day.

You put on the sheet you fashioned – like that cartoon you watched, It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown – with the holes in the sheet for your eyes.

So you go into the kitchen, and you walk up behind Hop as he cooks breakfast, and you just wait, until he finally turns around.

“Oh – Jesus!” he shouts.

You still didn't know who this Jesus person is that everyone talks about.

“Ghost,” you say.

“Yeah, I see that,” Hopper sighs.

“Halloween,” you continue, hoping Hop gets the message.

“Sure is,” he says absent-mindedly.

Absent-mindedly was the word of... a week in June? Something like that. Well, two words.

“But right now, it's breakfast, okay? Come on, let's eat,” Hop says. He's setting out food and preparing it, clearly trying to change the subject, but you refuse to be ignored.

“They wouldn't see me,” you say softly.

“Who wouldn't see you?”

“The bad men.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Trick or treat.”

You stand in front of him as he sits at the table, and he just looks at you in quiet, unimaginable awe.

“You want to go trick-or-treating?”

You nod.

He still looks shocked for a moment, before shaking his head furiously and getting up again. “You know the rules.”

“Yes, but –“

“Yeah, so you know the answer.”

“No, but they wouldn’t see me –“

“No, hey, *I don’t care* –“

He leans down to your level and holds you by the shoulders as you keep insisting they won’t see you and he keeps saying he doesn’t care.

Not again.

“You go out there, ghost or not, it’s a risk,” Hop reminds you, “We don’t take risks, all right? They’re stupid, and...”

He’s waiting for you to answer like you’ve done so many other times when you wanted to leave and do something. Usually help Mike.

“We’re. Not. Stupid.”

Argh.

“Exactly. Now, you take that off, sit down and eat. Your food’s getting cold.”

Come *on*!

You don’t even care that you have a lot of maple syrup. You hate this. You hate this. You hate this.

Hop lets out a long sigh.

“All right. How about I get off early tonight, and I buy us a bunch of candy, and we can sit around and get fat, and we watch a scary

movie together. How's that for a compromise?"

"C... Compromise?"

"C – O – M – promise. Compromise."

You're too frustrated to appreciate being taught to.

"How about that's your word for the day? Yeah? It's something that's kinda in-between. It's like hallway happy."

Halfway happy.

Okay.

That is still better than not being happy at all.

"By... five one five?" you ask.

"Five fifteen? Yeah, sure," Hop agrees.

"Promise?" you whisper. You really don't want him to be late *again*.

He leans forward and looks at you the way he did that day Mike was in trouble.

"Yes. I promise."

You smile a little. "Halfway happy."

It was a phrase you didn't mind.

And you turn to eat your French toast. He reaches across to ruffle your hair, and it makes you feel a little better, too.

Hop is weird, but he *is* so, so, so much better than Papa.

"Now I've got to go. Halloween is one of the most chaotic days of the year," Hop sighs.

"Chay... otic?"

"Means messy. That can be another word for the day, alright?" Hop

pauses, “Chaotic. C – H – A – O – T – I – C.”

You nod.

“Now I want you to work on your algebra problems, and read that book about the human body, alright?” Hop asks.

You were so happy when he said you were ready to learn the same things that Mike and his friends were learning. When you finally got out of here, you could join them in school! Really school! Like the kids on TV.

You nod eagerly and hug him before he leaves the cabin for the day. Lately – well, since you had thrown up so much and he stopped letting you have alcohol – he stayed over *almost* every night.

It is... nice.

You spend the day eagerly doing your problems. The thing you have the most trouble with are words. Numbers you can get down, and the pictures in the science book help a lot with everything, but you keep getting hung up on words. And books you have to read for school are the hardest part.

As caught up with the Party as you are with math and science and even history, you’re still very far behind on reading, and it *scares* you.

You don’t want to be a Monster anymore.

You want to be a Kid, with them, at school, spending the day with Mike so he’s not sad anymore.

And you have to get better at reading for that.

But, as you finish up reading and doing the problems, you fall into your habits.

TV is so much easier than trying to read a really, really, *really* hard book.

You flip between the channels with your mind, finding nothing much good. A “soap opera” is on, and you hate those, but they’re often the

only thing on. There are men and women on there and they're *mean* to each other and they do stupid things and they kiss... a *lot*, and sometimes you understand why, you can see that they love each other, but sometimes they seem to *hate* each other, so why do they kiss? And sometimes the women get mad because another women is with the man they love, and you don't understand why, it doesn't make much sense, but there must be *some* reason... right?

So now you watch the show and you space out, and you think about Mike.

Do you love Mike?

You don't really know.

You're not really sure you know how to love.

Monsters... Monsters don't know how to love.

But you mimic the show, because you want to learn how to be a person, a kid, a normal kid, rather than a Monster anymore, and the only real example of that you have is the stupid TV with the stupid men and women being weird all the time on the "soap operas".

So you go back to watching the show, and you think about how everyone looks different than you.

You remember when you were in the Lab.

And all the women in the coats had their lips looking different than yours, and clothes different than yours, and hair much much much different than yours.

And you remember asking Papa if you'd look like that when you grow up.

And you remember him saying that even though you were a girl, no, you wouldn't be pretty like them.

Why did you ever love Papa?

You really couldn't remember why, now.

You watch TV for a little bit longer, before turning back and trying to read your book – *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The words are hard, but you stay focused on the page, reading it slowly – one line at a time, looking up words as you go.

But the shadows grow longer, and five – one – five comes and goes, and there's no real sign of Hop.

So you turn back on the TV again to try and drown out your thoughts.

Of course Hop didn't come back.

Hop thinks you're a monster too.

And Hop finally realized he didn't want to take care of you anymore.

And now you'd be alone in the cabin again –

No.

No no no no no.

No.

Hop doesn't think you're a monster.

You don't know *why* he takes care of you, but you *know* he doesn't think that.

You wish you could leave, though. You know you're being protected from the Bad Men, but... you wish you could leave.

Especially now, on Halloween. When Mike is out somewhere.

Ghost... busting.

Also, you just want some damn candy.

You hold your Teddy Bear that Hop had gotten you a while ago, and you try to not cry as the loneliness sets in. It's dark, and it's a holiday, and you're alone, again, and you just want to be with someone. You just want someone to talk to.

It seeps into every part of you – every *cell*, that's what your book calls them – and a weight sinks in your stomach and refuses to leave as you watch spooky movies, alone. Without Hop.

The TV is playing something about a monster, a big ol' green monster. And you can't help but start having those thoughts again.

You're the Monster.

You're not Maria.

You're the Monster.

Beep Beep Beep –

You go and translate the beeping –

1. A. T. E.

Late.

Hop is late.

Again.

Hop is always late.

And you just wanted to go trick-or-treating. That's all. That's all you wanted.

You sit and you cry on the floor for a while.

You remember how alone you felt in the woods. How alone you've felt your whole life.

Except when Hop is around.

And when you were with Mike.

Why can't you just not be alone anymore?

You just don't want to be alone anymore...

But you *are* alone.

Probably because you're a monster.

You shut off the machine, and walk back to the couch to hug your teddy bear. You cry for a long, long while, because you have nothing to distract you from this pain, really. Nothing to fix it.

Just emptiness.

After a while you hear knocking on the door to the cabin. Hop is back. You take the TV and you drag it into your room so you can be alone.

You don't want to let him in.

If you're to be alone, you might as well be alone.

"Hey, kid, open up, all right? Look, I... I know I'm late. I got candy here, all right? I got all the good stuff."

You sit in your room and you don't open the door.

"Please, will you open the door? I'm gonna freeze to death out here!"

Well. You don't want him to die, anyway. You don't want to be *more* of a monster.

You open the door with your mind, but don't go near it. You stay in your room, even though you can hear Hop walking towards it.

"Hey kid... Open up, would you?"

"I... I got, uh, stuck somewhere, and I lost track of time. And I'm... sorry. El, would you please open the door? El?"

Two parts of you tug at each other. You don't want to be alone anymore, so you want to open the door.

But you're also *mad*.

You didn't actually ask for *much*.

You just want to *leave*. For a *second*. You just want to leave *for a second*.

You're *sick of being stuck here!*

STUCK HERE WITH YOUR EVIL, EVIL, EVIL MONSTER THOUGHTS –

And you don't open the door.

Hop moves away from the door.

"All right. I'm just gonna be out here by myself, eating all this candy. I'm gonna get fat. It's very unhealthy to leave me out here. I could have a heart attack or something. But, you know, you do what you want."

You honestly don't care right now.

You turn the TV to snow.

Might as well not be *completely* alone.

You put on your blindfold.

And you find Mike in the Void. He's sitting in what used to be your bed, in what you can only assume is the Ghost-Buster costume, looking a little lost.

"It's day three-hundred and fifty-three. I had a bad day today."

Did he hurt himself a lot? You can't tell, but you're also far away and you need to walk up to him.

"I don't know. I... I guess I wish you were here. I mean, we all do. If you're out there, just, please... Give me a sign..."

Watching him always hurts.

Hearing him always hurts.

Being so close to him and unable to touch him always hurts.

But you kneel next to him anyway.

You don't give a shit about Hop's rules.

Not right now anyway.

He looks up at you, even though you know he can't really see you.

He looks more lost than he's looked since...

You try not to cry.

You whisper, "Mike."

"Eleven?" he whispers back.

You reach out to touch his cheek even though it won't work.

You just want to feel him again.

You just want to be with him again.

He closes the walkie and he walks out of the room, leaving you behind.

And now you let the tears fall.

You are lost, and alone, and Mike is probably going to finally give up on you, because you never show up, you only watch.

Everything hurts.

Everything hurts.

Everything... hurts.

You should have just died when you killed that other Monster. But you didn't.

And now you just hurt instead.

NOVEMBER 1 1984

You wake up the next morning to Hopper being in your room.

“So that’s it, huh? You’re still not talking.”

“I guess I’m just gonna have to, uh... enjoy this triple-decker Eggo extravaganza on my own.”

Eggos.

Eggos!

You get up and follow Hop back into the living room.

Because you can never say no to Eggos.

You get dressed, and Hopper doesn’t say much of anything, he just cuts the ridiculously sweet Eggos for you as you watch, and you still don’t want to talk, because Mike is in pain, and you can’t let him be in pain anymore.

You have to go back now.

This has gone on too long.

He’s putting on a show of how good the Eggos are and you’re tempted to smile. But you still don’t.

Because no.

Not today.

He looks around and then looks back at you.

“You visited him again last night?”

You wait a minute before answering.

“He says he needs me.”

Hop looks at you seriously, and you can see reflected in his eyes that feeling you *both* had the last time things got... bad. That bad. When Mike sounded as lost as he did last night.

“Want me to go check on him?”

You shake your head.

You need more than that.

"I know that you miss him, all right? But it's too dangerous. You're the last thing he needs right now. You're gonna see him, soon. And not just in that head of yours. You're gonna see him in real life. I feel like I'm making progress with these people."

That's too much.

You're not here for this.

Not today.

Not with Mike like this.

"Friends. Don't. Lie."

"What –"

"You see 'soon' on day twenty-one," you can feel your voice rising, "You say 'soon' on day two-hundred and five. You now say 'soon' on day three-hundred and twenty-six?"

"What is this?" Hopper demands, "You're like counting the days now like you're some kind of prisoner?"

I AM A PRISONER!

"When. Is. Soon?"

"Soon is when... it's... not dangerous anymore," Hopper says, and you know he's trying to change the subject, avoid the question.

"When?"

You need to know.

Hopper doesn't meet your eyes.

"I don't know."

“On day five-hundred?”

“I don’t know –“

“On day six-hundred?”

“I don’t know –“

“Day seven-hundred? On day eight-hundred?” you’re shouting now.

Screaming, now.

“No!”

“I need to see him! Tell me!”

YOU NEED TO STOP HIM FROM BLEEDING ANYMORE

YOU CAN’T HANDLE HIM BLEEDING ANYMORE

YOU CAN’T

YOU CAN’T

YOU CAN’T

“I said I –“

NO

You flick your head, and the Eggos go everywhere.

“Oh – Shit! SHIT!” Hopper yells.

You stand up and look at him.

“Friends. Don’t. Lie.”

And you run back to your room.

Slamming the door shut behind you.

Hopper kicks the table. And he doesn’t say much of anything as he

leaves the cabin.

Guess you're just going to watch TV today.

Or... maybe...

No.

No, that's crazy.

You go and you lie down in bed, and you just stare out in front of you all day.

Not really thinking much.

Just...

Just lying there.

You're too sad to think.

You're too empty to do anything.

The shadows grow longer, and your heart feels tighter.

You make a move to visit with Mike – putting on your blindfold and everything – but you can't handle that.

You can't handle to see Mike in pain right now.

Instead you're going to find him.

You walk up to the door and stare at it. Your heart pounds in your ears.

But you've spent the whole day lost in your own sadness and not even *thinking* and the time all went by and you didn't move at all because you couldn't move at all and you're not here for Hopper's fucking *prison*.

You open up the curtains and the blinds on the windows.

You open up the front door and step outside.

Fuck this.

You're leaving.

You don't care about the rules.

"Not stupid," you mutter angrily, as you step over the trip wire and head out into the woods.

It's time to see Mike again.

You walk through the woods as fast as you can, meandering until you manage to find a house with a mom and a kid. You watch them for a while, until you see that they've come up to you.

"Is your mom here? Sweetie?" the woman asks.

"School?" you whisper, "Where is school?"

"The school, it's uh... it's about a mile that way. At least. Where are your parents?"

You don't want her asking questions.

You make the swing go around, and before the woman can see you, you've left.

You can't be found out.

You walk and walk and walk and walk until you finally manage to find the middle school. You look at it, and your heart starts to pound so loudly you can't breathe right.

You're going to see Mike.

You're going to see Mike *for real*.

And tell him to stop hurting himself.

You see his bike, and your heart pounds even louder. Because he's here. He's really, really here.

You can't help but touch it.

You think of the last time you felt fully happy.

Not halfway happy.

Full happy.

Sitting on that bike with Mike.

You run into the school, and you begin looking around. You have to find him. You have to find him. You have to find him. You have to find him –

You hear something that sounds like him, and you turn a corner, but you don't see him anywhere. So you keep moving through the school, wandering the empty hallways and wishing you could find him faster. The faster you find him, the sooner you can get back before Hopper notices.

You wander and wander and wander and wander until you can hear his voice off in the distance –

"I don't see any tricks. You're just going around in a circle."

"if it's so easy, *you* try it!" a different voice responds.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know how!"

You walk towards the voice, as fast as you can, and you look up against the window to a large empty room – the gym, you remember now –

Mike is there, and he's...

He's just how you remember. Just how you see in the Void.

And he's wearing long sleeves so you can't see his arms.

And there's a girl with him, with hair so long and red it reminds you of that girl. From the book. Anne.

And she's spinning around on a... board... thing... and Mike is watching her.

You remember your soap operas.

You remember the men and women.

Did this girl like Mike like you like Mike?

Did that even make any sense?

Who was she?

What was she doing there?

Was life actually like those stupid shows and now that you'd been gone for so long Mike was going to be with this girl instead of you?

You get so, so, so angry you can't control it.

You make the girl fall off the board thing.

And Mike reaches to help her up.

And he's touching her, and you know what touching leads to now thanks to those shows, and you hurt all over all over all over –

Maybe Mike *doesn't* need you.

Maybe now he has this new girl. Anne. Whoever.

You run away, as fast as you can. You don't care that you hurt Anne.

That's what monsters do after all.

And you run back to the cabin as fast as you can, because you have to get back there before Hop does.

And there's no point to anything anyway, not really. Not anymore.

But when you get there, the light is on, and Hop is clearly there on the porch, smoking.

Well.

Time to be yelled at for being a Monster again.

You go inside, and the explosions begin fairly quickly.

“Friends don’t lie! Isn’t that your bullshit saying?” Hop screams. You walk away and go into your room, but he stops you from closing the door.

“Where’d you go on your little field trip, huh? *Where?!?*”

You don’t say anything, you just prepare to scream back.

“Did you go see Mike?”

Your heart breaks a little at his name.

“He didn’t see me.”

“Yeah, well, that mother and her daughter did and they called the cops! Now, did *anyone else see you? Anyone, at all?*”

You don’t say anything. You’re just mad at being yelled at.

“Come on, I need you to *think!*”

“NOBODY SAW ME,” you shriek back.

“You put us in danger,” Hop snarls, “You realize that, right?”

But no.

You’re not going to take that this time. You point at him, and shout, “YOU promised – I go – and I *never leave!* NOTHING EVER HAPPENS!”

“Yeah, nothing happens and YOU STAY SAFE!”

He hits the dresser and you flinch.

He’s never laid a hand on you.

But Papa and others have in the past.

So why wouldn't he?

"You LIE," you scream, because you can't stop, you can't stop being *so mad* –

"I don't *lie*! I protect and I feed and I teach! And all I ask of you is that you follow three simple rules. Three rules. And you know what? You can't even do THAT."

He walks out of your room in a huff.

You're crying, and you can't really stop.

"You're grounded," Hopper says from the living room.

"You know what that means? It means no Eggos... and no TV for a *week!*"

NO.

If you're so bored even with TV imagine what thoughts you'd be left with without it!

You stop him from taking it.

"All right, knock it off. Let go."

You shake your head.

"Okay. Two weeks," he snarls, and you keep holding on to the TV.

"LET. GO."

You shake your head again.

"A *Month!*"

"NO!"

"Well, congratulations. You just graduated from no TV for a month to no TV *at all!*"

He pulls on a cord.

The picture goes out.

“NO!” you scream, your veins like fire, your heart like eyes, your entire body being pulled into every direction at once –

You run to the TV and try to fix it, shouting *No* over and over again in horror.

“You have *got* to understand that there are *consequences to your actions!*” Hopper shouts.

“YOU are like PAPA!” you scream, before you can stop yourself.

No, he didn’t... touch... you... like Papa... but...

You were trapped... like in... the Lab...

Don’t think about that Don’t think about that Don’t think about that
Don’t think about that Don’t think about that Don’t think about that
Don’t think about that Don’t think about that Don’t think about that
Don’t think about that Don’t think about that Don’t think –

“Really?” Hopper groans, “I’m like *that psychotic* son of a bitch? Wow. All right. You wanna go back in the lab?”

The words make your heart shatter. You shake your head.

“One phone call, I can make that happen.”

No.

No.

No.

“I HATE YOU,” you scream.

“Yeah, well, I’m not so crazy about you either,” Hopper states, looking menacing and horrible and you just want to get away get out of there get away get out of there get away get out of there get away get out of there get –

“You know why? Cause you’re a *brat*. You know what that word means? How about that be your word for the day, huh? Brat. Why don’t we look it up –“

He grabs the dictionary –

“B R A T –“

He throws it at you –

“Brat –“

You stop it in midair –

You throw it back at him –

He dodges out of the way –

“HEY – WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

He’s approaching you, and you’re not going to let him get any closer, and you ram the couch into him, and your blood is *boiling*, and you *hate him* –

You *hate him* –

YOU HATE HIM

HE KEEPS YOU HERE AND YOU DRINK AND YOU NEARLY DIE AND MIKE NEARLY DIES AND YOU HATE HIM! HE LOCKS YOU UP! HE LOCKS YOU UP JUST. LIKE. PAPA.

“Hey! Hey!”

You slam a shelf off the wall as you walk away in a huff. He keeps running after you and shouting as you slam the door after you in your room.

“OPEN THIS DOOR! OPEN THE DAMN DOOR!”

You fall against the wall sobbing.

You’re trapped.

You're trapped as always.

You're always *trapped*.

"YOU WANNA GO OUT IN THE WORLD? YOU BETTER GROW UP!
GROW THE HELL UP!"

You can't stop crying and now you're screaming –

Screaming –

Screaming –

All the glass of the cabin shatters and flies about and you don't care,
you don't care, you don't care –

This has been the *year from hell and you just want to BE FUCKING
FREE* –

You lie against the wall, sobbing

And sobbing

And sobbing

And sobbing

And everything inside you is just broken forever

And you sob until you fall asleep.

N O V E M B E R 2 1 9 8 4

The next morning you stay in your room, even though you can hear
Hopper nailing shut all the windows that were broken the night
before.

You don't really want to see him, so you avoid going out as you hear
him moving about the room.

And, honestly, everything still hurts and aches, and it's only *partially*
because you slept on the floor last night.

“Hey, kid...”

You tense up at the sound of his voice.

“Listen... um... about last night, I, uh...”

You’re not really interested in hearing this.

It doesn’t matter what he says now.

The damage is done.

“I want this place cleaned up by the time I get back. And then, maybe I’ll consider fixing the TV. You hear me?”

You hear him walking away, for one.

Right.

Whatever.

You wait until you know he’s gone, and then go out into the living room. You try to fix the TV yourself for a bit, but you know that there’s no point, so you start sweeping up the glass, packing away your dictionary, moving cabinets back where they go, and dust trying to fix the situation you managed to create for yourself the night before.

Everything’s a mess. A dusty, claustrophobic mess.

And you just wish you didn’t live there anymore.

As you sweep, you notice a hole in the floorboards. Curious – and not in the mood for playing nice –

You’re a Monster.

You don’t *have* to play nice.

- You move things out of the way and open it up, finding it’s a door to the floor below.

You dangle down into the hole, looking around at all the boxes,

covered in dust and spiders and who knew what else, really. The boxes all have words on them, and they're strewn about everywhere, and you don't really know why you're down here, exactly, but you're sad and you're alone and you just kind of wish none of this had ever happened.

And then you see a box that says Hawkins Lab.

You crawl down into the the space, feeling disgusting and dirty and dusty, and you manage to pull the box out with your mind, and you drag it back up to the floor, and you push it across and sit and sit up.

Hawkins Lab?

The box is filled with files after files after files. You pull one out, and the words are tiny, and there are a lot of them, and many of them start to blur together, and honestly you're having trouble focusing on any of them. The letters in the words always look weird, but now they look *especially* weird with this particular kind of type.

You squint, and you force the letters to go to something more... normal, using your mind, and you try to read, try to get the words to make sense on the page.

You spend the whole day sort of, rearranging the letters in your mind to make words. Sometimes you have to do this, sometimes you don't. Depends on what the letters look like, and how big or small they are. So it takes you a while to read every article.

Most things are uninteresting. Hopper trying to figure out where Will went last year, you figure after a while. Soon you just start throwing all the papers on the floor, until you find one that says –

“IVES, TERRY.”

You open it up and read.

There's a woman.

And her daughter Jane was taken when she was a baby.

And was taken by the Hawkins Lab.

And...

There's a photo of Papa with the woman.

Hopper has been lying to you about when you can leave for *months*.

Was he lying about this too?

Has he been lying about if you have a mother?

You know you're thirteen years old. You know that, because Papa told you once – your age – and you've been keeping track of it ever since.

Terry Ives' daughter would be thirteen, too.

You grab the radio and you turn it to static. You grab your blindfold and you sit, and you concentrate.

You have to find Terry Ives.

You have to find...

You have to find your momma.

You enter the void and search until you find a woman sitting in a rocking chair.

She's mumbling words over and over again, repeating them in the same sequence. Over and over and over.

And her eyes are closed.

And then she opens them.

And she whispers Jane.

"Mama?" you ask, reaching for her hand, your heart in your throat – but doing that makes her disappear.

"Mama!" you scream, "Mama?"

You can't stop crying as you lay in the water, repeating "MAMA!"

over and over again until you take off the blindfold and break down crying.

You sob.

And you sob.

And you sob.

And you sob.

And you sob.

And you sob.

And you sob.

You come from a human person. From a woman. From your Mama.

You come from a person.

At one point, you *were* a person.

And then they made you a Monster.

And they made your Mama... something.

A vegetable.

And you can't stop crying, and crying, and crying, and crying, and crying, until you just lie down on the floor, curled in on yourself, staring out in front of you, feeling numb, numb, numb, numb, numb.

Numb.

Numb.

Numb.

NOVEMBER 3 1984

You fell asleep on the floor that night, and you woke up stiff as a board.

Hopper never came back, and frankly, you don't really care. Not anymore.

You already are a Monster, so you don't have to think about how that makes you... more of one. All that matters is that you have to find Mama.

You don't have anything you own that you particularly care about, except a few books, the Terry Ives article, and some clothes that you pack into a small bag, and you just put on new clothes and head out of the Cabin as quickly as you can. You don't even lock the door behind you, leaving behind the mess of papers and books and glass and everything else, walking through the woods until you reach the road.

The air is cold around you as you wait for a truck to pass, holding out your arm like you saw on the TV. A truck slows down, and you get in, your heart in your throat with the nervousness coursing through you.

"Where are you goin', kid?"

"Back home," you say quietly, "To my Mama." The man nods, frowning.

"And where is that?"

You list the address you learned in your head, and you sit quietly throughout the drive through Hawkins, not wanting to give him any more information.

Hopper may have hurt you, but he still is right about a few things.

"All right, I think this is it. Five – one – five Larrabee, right?" the man asks.

You look up at him and nod slight, whispering 'yes'.

You're too tired to get that excited about anything anymore.

"Five –fifteen."

“Alright – five –fifteen, sure.”

“Thank you,” you whisper.

“Hey – you apologize to your mama, yeah? Huh? Must be scared half to death,” the man says as you get out of the truck, “How long’s it been?”

“Long time,” you say, softly, trying to hold back tears. You watch the truck leave, and you go up, down the path, to the house.

It’s deep in the woods, with piles and piles of wood on the porch, reminding you of the cabin a little bit. You knock on the door, so weighed down by... everything... that you can’t even really get nervous, really.

“GO AWAY! I’M NOT INTERESTED!”

You knock again anyway as much as you can, until the door is opened partway again.

“Look, I don’t want your Thin Mints, all right, kid?”

“Thin Mints?” you murmur.

“Or your religious mumbo jumbo – whatever you’re selling, I ain’t buying, okay?”

She slams the door in your face.

Well time to do this the Monster way.

You concentrate, and unlock the door with your mind, like you’ve done so many times before, really. And the door slowly creaks open, and you stare at the woman who kept you out.

“I want. To see. Mama.”

The woman looks at you in shock and silence, leading you back through the house.

“... Jane?” she whispers.

“Yes,” you mutter back.

“I...” but she doesn’t say anything more, she just leads you through to another room, where your Mama is sitting in a chair, staring at a TV. She’s muttering those words to herself again.

“Rainbow. Three to the right. Four to the left. Four-fifty.”

“Mama?” you whisper, walking over to her as she keeps talking –

“Breathe. Sunflower. Rainbow. Three to the right. Four to the left.”

“Mama, can you hear me?” you gasp out, your heart clenching again.

“Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower.”

You kneel before her, trying not to cry again, because you’ve cried too much the past few days. Frankly, it just hurts to keep crying.

“Rainbow.”

“Mama? It’s me... Jane.”

You put your hand on hers.

“I’m here now.”

She turns, and looks at you, and keeps talking –

“Breathe. Sunflower. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe...”

“What’s wrong with Mama?” you murmur, looking back at the other woman.

She doesn’t answer. She just holds her mouth in her hands and starts crying.

“Come. I... I should talk to you,” she murmurs. She leads you back to the kitchen, and you sit down, watching as she makes a sandwich for you and pours a glass of water.

“I’m your Mama’s sister. Your Aunt Becky. Before we... get into all of this. I want you to... explain to me where you’ve come from,” she

says.

She does look like you a little. Curly hair. Dark.

“I just need a little help understanding, sweetie, okay?”

“Can you tell me where you came from?”

You can’t stop watching Mama.

“Where you’ve been all this time?”

You still don’t answer.

The less they know, the better, you guess.

The less they know you’re a Monster, the better.

“A policeman and a woman came looking for you last year. Did they find you?”

“She won’t get better, will she?” you finally ask. You have to ask, even if it’s going to hurt.

“They don’t think so, no,” Aunt Becky murmurs, “But she’s not in any pain. She’s just stuck, they think. Like in a dream. A long dream.”

You finally turn back to her, trying not to cry.

Again.

“A good dream?”

“I hope so.”

You sigh again.

Trapped in a dream forever.

Just dreaming.

Over and over and over again.

That's almost what the past year has felt like, really.

It sounds painfully familiar.

"Is it the same dream?"

"We don't know... Sometimes... she says different words."

"But usually those."

And now you're crying.

Not the heavy sobs that have wracked your body the past few days.

Just quiet tears.

Your own tears.

In a way, Hopper lied to you. Your Mama was still alive.

But yes.

She was gone.

She had gone a long time ago.

And it's as though all those wounds from the Lab that you clumsily taped together the past year are being re-opened all at once, bleeding out like Mike's arm.

Becky reaches across for you, even though you're not looking.

"She always believed that you were out there. She always believed that you'd come home one day."

You turn back.

"Home?"

This is a word that has been said to you so much you don't really know what it means anymore.

"Yeah. Home."

And you reach across, and you hold Aunt Becky's hand.

Home.

You return to the sandwich, eating it slowly, and get up and follow Aunt Becky through the house. You reach a room that looks like it hasn't been entered in years – dust everywhere and things laid out for a baby. A crib. A dollhouse. A rocking chair.

This was supposed to be your room.

You reach in, and grab the bear.

“Pretty,” you whisper.

“I can get you a real bed, and you can stay here. With me,” Aunt Becky murmurs, “If you want.”

“How's that sound?”

You nod.

You don't want to go back to the Cabin.

You don't know if this is a good idea.

But none of your other ideas ever work out

So.

“I wanna help you, but to really do that, I need you to talk to me, okay?” Aunt Becky murmurs, “Doesn't have to be now. Doesn't have to be today. But when you're ready. Okay?”

“Okay,” you murmur.

Some day.

The lights flicker.

Flicker.

Flicker?

You walk towards them in confusion.

“Oh yeah, that. That happens sometimes. Old house, bad wiring... Or if you ask my crazy Aunt Shirley, it’s... haunted...” Aunt Becky explains, but you’re already following the lights back downstairs.

Not haunted.

“Sweetie, really, it’s just the wiring...”

“No,” you murmur.

You know what this is.

You go to Mama, and kneel in front of her, looking up at her.

“It’s Mama.”

She has blood coming from her nose.

She’s trying to talk to you.

“I... I don’t understand –“

“She knows I’m here,” you whisper.

And the TV channels start flipping.

Flipping to snow.

“She wants to talk.”

“What... what do you mean?”

“In... in our minds. I need a blindfold,” you whisper.

“In your – what –“

“A blindfold. Please.”

Aunt Becky nods, looking distressed, but she goes into the kitchen and takes out a cloth, cutting it into a strip for you.

“Like this?”

You nod. “Yes.”

You both go back into the Living Room, and you sit in front of Mama with the static going, and you put the blind fold on.

“It’s okay if I sit here, right?”

“Yes.”

“And I won’t mess it up or anything?”

“No.”

“Okay...”

“If you... talk to Terry... will you tell her that I love her very much?
And that... I’m sorry that I didn’t believe...”

“Stop talking.”

Come on.

Stupid... non-monsters... not knowing anything...

“Okay, sorry.”

You focus on the noise, and you breathe in and out slowly, searing in
your mind –

And you’re in the Void.

And your mom is there in front of you.

And you walk through the water towards her.

“Mama?”

She keeps talking.

“Mama, it’s me... Jane. I’m here now.”

You walk more in front of her, trying to get her to stop this loop...

"I'm home."

She looks up, and straight at you.

"No."

No?

And she grabs your arm –

And everything is flashing – flashing – flashing – flashing –

You're in the Void again.

But a different Void.

"MAMA?"

A woman runs behind you. You see her doubling over.

You see her fall to the floor.

It's Mama.

And she's very, very, *very* round.

And younger.

So much younger.

And bleeding all over.

"Mama? Mama!"

"Oh, my baby –"

"What do I do? Mama, what do I do? Help me!"

You've forgotten that this is all a memory.

You hear Aunt Becky's voice...

“Breathe. Breathe. Just breathe. Breathe. Just breathe, all right?
They’re on their way –“

You’re not in the void anymore.

You’re back in the living room, but it’s the past, and Mama is bleeding all over and panting, and Aunt Becky is telling her to breathe –

And now you’re in a hospital, and you’re looking up at women in green outfits, and you’re being driven down a brightly lit hallway, and everything *hurts hurts hurts hurts hurts* –

There are so many doctors –

They’re all talking –

A knife is cutting you open –

But you’re not you, you’re Mama –

And everything’s a blur –

And they’ve taken a baby out of Mama and that baby is crying and is that baby... *you?*

... Papa...

And now there were Sunflowers, and Aunt Becky crying, and telling Mama that Jane is lost –

But you’re not lost –

You cried –

And you are alive –

Papa took you from Mama –

And now the future. Mama is older. And she’s opening a locker. And there’s a gun. And she’s going to the Lab, and she’s walking inside with other women, with the gun –

And she shoots a guard –

And she's going through the lab –

And she sees a room with a rainbow on it –

The room is bare and empty and white –

And there's a little pale girl with long hair playing with an older,
darker girl –

And Mama's getting dragged away –

And she's getting held down –

And there are things all over her face –

And a man is... hurting her

Hurting her

Hurting her

Hurting her

Hurting her

And Papa is there too –

And they wreck her brain –

Until she's trapped in these memories.

And you are...

You escape.

Mama.

You can't think anymore.

But.

Mama.

This is what happened to you. And to Mama.

This is what Papa did to you first, before all those other things.

This is why you're trapped.

And the memories just keep going in your brain over and over and over again.

It's like you're your Mama now.

And Aunt Becky tries to help, but this is all too much.

Too much.

Too much.

Eventually you manage to tell her what happened, and Aunt Becky tries to understand, but she's... not very... smart.

“And it just kept repeating?”

“Repeat?” you ask quietly.

“Like a circle?” Aunt Becky offers, “Just showing you the same image over and over?”

Not really...

“She kept showing the girl in the room.”

“The rainbow room?”

You nod.

“What did the girl look like?”

Dark.

Older.

Black hair.

“Different.”

“Different than you?”

You nod quietly.

And Aunt Becky nods back.

“I think this is why Mama wanted to talk,” you whisper.

“To show you the girl?”

You nod again.

You have to find her.

“I think she wants me to find her.”

Aunt Becky starts digging through files, throwing some on the ground every which way, like you had when you were looking through Hopper’s...

“When your Mama was looking for you, she kept these files of other missing kids. Kids she thought were like you.”

Monsters.

Aunt Becky pulls out a large file and kneels before you.

There are all sorts of newspaper articles on missing babies that you know will be hard for you to read.

Boys and girls of all sorts from all around the world.

And then there’s a picture of the girl from the Rainbow room.

An “Indian” girl from “London.”

The rest of the words are too hard to make out.

But it’s her.

“Is that her?”

You nod quietly.

“Okay... how are you going to find her?” Aunt Becky asks.

“In the mind,” you whisper. Aunt Becky watches you silently as you go back into the living room and turn on the TV static and put on your blindfold. You focus on the picture of the girl.

But you can’t see anything.

You take off the blindfold.

“Did you find her?” Aunt Becky asks.

“No,” you murmur.

Aunt Becky sighs, and makes dinner, and you eat in silence, before you go back upstairs to your room.

You lie down.

You think about the girl.

Not just the picture, but the memories Mama shared.

And you enter the Void again.

And you see a fire burning in a barrel.

And a girl standing by it, warming her hands.

Chicago.

She’s in Chicago.

“Becky! Becky, I found her – “ you shout, running downstairs.

But Aunt Becky is on the phone.

And she’s telling someone about you.

And they’re going to come and kill your Mama and Aunt and take you away again.

Or Hopper will.

One of the two.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit fuck.

Shit.

You see Aunt Becky's purse, and you take money, and you grab your stuff, and you run out as fast as you can.

You should have known you couldn't stay here.

You can't stay anywhere.

Not really.

You run through the town until you find your way to the bus stop. It doesn't take long to get there, really, though you're really tired, and the night is getting late.

You get on a bus to Chicago. The ride should only take three hours.

You settle in on the bus, rest your head against the window, and try to get a little bit of sleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

I kind of headcanon El/Jane as Dyslexic. Unlike my other headcanons though I know there's like, no canon basis for this, but I figured it would add another layer to her.

I read some stuff recently about whether or not El actually IS Jane and while I think she is Jane, I admit the thought is compelling. I'll be going forward as though she is Jane in this story but take this as a "I've thought about that, trust me" bit, I guess.

I tried to come up with halfway decent explanations for A) why El would want to be "pretty" in S1 B) why she actually tried to kiss Mike in that one episode of S1 and C) why she would get jealous of Max and trust me, I know my reasoning for all of these is a fucking reach. Blame the Duffer brothers for letting tired ol' heteronormative cliches insert themselves where they don't belong.

Please comment! This chapter and the next, seriously. I wrote so much, I like, need the

comments, haha. Thank you all :)

8. Losing Yourself

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Suicidal Thoughts, Allusion to Childhood Sexual & Physical Abuse, Current Emotional Abuse, and Underage Drinking

N O V E M B E R 4 1 9 8 4

J A N E I V E S

You reach Chicago a little after midnight.

It's late, and you know you're young, so you try to not draw attention to yourself.

Everything is lights, and tall and crowded, and bright.

You take another bus – a city one this time – down south, until you're in Back of the Yards, with its run down buildings and gun shots and police sirens.

You walk down an alley with men and women who look... different.

They look scary.

But you run past them, because you know where you're going.

Until you find the warehouse.

You let yourself in, and walk through, looking around at the graffiti and... junk... and just.

This is... different.

There are four adults by the fire barrel, keeping warm. They all look weirder than people you've met before.

Your heart is pounding as loudly as it can in your throat.

"Hello?" you ask.

They all look at you, and the tall man with the weird hair goes, "Well, well... What do we have here?"

A woman with large, poofy black hair goes, "What is she wearing? What are those, overalls?"

"There aren't any cows to milk here, kid," a woman with messy blonde hair says slowly, "Go on back to the farm now."

"I'm looking for my sister," you say softly.

You're not scared of these people.

Not when you're a Monster.

But you still don't feel like hurting people right now.

"Aw... Shirley Temple lost her sister. So sad," says the man with the crazy hair.

"I saw her. Here," you say, pulling out the newspaper. The man without hair yells at you, and you pull out the paper slowly in response.

The man with the crazy hair takes it from you, looking at it, speechless. The woman with the poofy black hair takes it too, and gasps, "Is that Kali?"

"Kali?" you ask quietly.

"How did you find us?" the crazy haired man demands, "Who else knows you're here?"

"No one," you say, looking up at him angrily.

"So, what then? Poof! You just show up like magic with that picture?" he roars.

"Stay calm, she's just a kid –" the poofy haired woman says.

"A kid who could get us all *killed!*"

He pulls out a knife and approaches you closer, hissing, "If I have to

ask again, Shirley, you're gonna start losing things. Starting with those pretty little locks of yours, yeah?"

"Come on, Axe, put down the knife –"

"How did you *FIND US*?"

"I saw her – " you say.

"Axe!"

"That's not an answer –"

But he's looking at his hand, and he starts freaking out, and he drops the knife and starts dancing everywhere and screaming –

"You're a terrible dancer, Axel," a voice says from up the stairs.

You look and see a girl – older than you, around Nancy's age maybe? Maybe a little younger – with wild, dyed purple black hair looking at you all.

Kali.

She walks downstairs.

"I told you, *stay out of my head* – "

"So we're threatening little girls now, are we?" Kali says angrily, walking over to you.

"She knows about you –"

"She had this –"

Kali looks at the newspaper, and then at you.

"Where did you get this?"

You take it back.

"Mama."

“Your mother gave this to you?”

“In her Dream Circle...”

“Dream Circle. I think she’s a schizo or something,” the crazy haired man snorts.

“Says she’s looking for her sister...” the poofy haired woman responds.

“Yeah, like I said. Schizo.”

He reaches for the knife, and you grab it with your mind.

Just to get them to shut the fuck up.

You fold up the knife, looking only at Kali.

“I saw you. In the rainbow room.” You hand her the knife.

Kali walks over to you more, the two of you circling each other in the cold, empty, wet room.

“What is your name?”

“Jane.”

Kali looks at you for another minute, and then reaches for your arm. She pulls back the sleeve until she reveals the horrid **011** permanently etched into your skin to mark you as the Monster you are.

You do the same for her.

008.

Eight.

You look at her.

She looks at you.

For a moment...

Everything...

“Sister,” you breathe.

“Sister,” she responds, with the same look on her face as is on yours.

And your heart fills with warmth.

This is different than finding Mama.

Mama is broken, more broken than you or Mike or anyone you’ve met.

And maybe Kali is too.

But she’s *here*.

She isn’t so broken that she’s gone.

And it’s not like finding your mother as a half-corpse, forever trapped in her head.

You’ve actually found someone.

And you feel like when Hopper and you first set up the Cabin together, or when Mike said that he’d hide you and stay with you, and go to the Snow Ball together...

You feel that feeling go from your toes to your head to your fingers to everywhere and it makes you almost cry with relief because you finally don’t feel completely like ice and terribleness and like you deserve to die but you don’t because you’re a coward you actually feel...

Like it’s going to be OK.

Like here was a person who cared about you... unconditionally. And you would care about them.

That’s what this feels like.

That’s what Mike feels like.

That's what Hopper used to feel like.

This is.

Love.

And you reach for each other and you hold each other tightly, without another word on the matter.

Maybe it'll all be okay now.

"We should talk," Kali says after a while, pulling back from your hug and looking at you, "Alone."

You nod, and she leads you up the stairs and out onto the roof, the entire skyline of Chicago staring back at you in glistening fashion. It's so bright, you've never really seen anything like it.

You feel almost at home here, really...

"So. Tell me. Tell me how you got here," Kali asked, looking at you and smiling. You look away for a bit, staring back out at the lake and the city, trying to get the words to actually organize themselves in your head, but all you can think is a repeated string of relief and longing, all at once.

"I... they used me. My... powers. They wanted me to find. The men. With fuzzy hats."

"Fuzzy... hats?"

"Russians," you find the word at last. Kali nods, rolling her eyes even.

"I did. But one day, in my mind, I found... a monster. Instead. The monster scared me. My powers went. Everywhere."

"Everywhere...?"

"Everywhere. I broke open the world."

Kali watches you in shock, not saying much of anything as you continue to try to talk.

“The monster escaped, and... everything was...chaotic. And. I escaped the Bad Men.”

“Good for you,” Kali says, smiling so wide it lit up her entire face.

“I ran out and I found... friends,” you try not to cry, “And they hid me. And we –“

“Wait wait wait. Friends? What friends?”

“Um... Mike. And Dustin. And Lucas.”

“Boys?”

“My age. Yes.”

“Okay...”

“And we tried to look for their friend, Will, because when the monster came out, the monster took Will to... that place. That I. The Upside Down.”

“Upside... Down?”

“The world the monster is from.”

“Okay...”

“The Bad Men kept chasing us, and we kept escaping... I lifted a van to keep my friends safe... but then the Policeman found us. But we worked together with this Policeman. And Will’s Mama. And we found Will. But then the Bad Men found me... and the Monster found all of us... and I destroyed the Monster...”

“Good.”

You swallow and keep going. It’s hard to think about this.

“And then I got back, because I had gone to the Upside Down... when I did that... and I went to go back to Mike’s, but the Bad Men were there, so I ran away...”

“Good. You kept Mike safe.”

... Sure.

People don't seem to understand the meaning of the word safe.

Whatever.

"I lived in the woods... and then the Policeman found me... he took me to his old cabin and I stayed there, hidden..."

"Did he take care of you?"

"Yes. But I couldn't leave."

"So, another prison. Like the Lab."

"Yeah..."

"You escaped again?"

"He lied to me. The Policeman. He lied to me about Mama. Friends don't lie. And he lied about the Bad Men."

"How did he lie?"

"He said she was gone. And he said... one day, I could leave."

"Is she gone?"

"She's alive. That's not gone."

"But...?"

"She's trapped in a memory. The Bad Men destroyed her mind."

"Did you see the memory? Did you visit with her?"

"I went to her house. I visited with her. She showed me her memory."

"What was the memory?"

"My Mama. Giving birth to me. Losing me to Papa. Her trying to get me. Us playing in the Rainbow Room. Her mind being destroyed."

Kalie watches you for a long time as you look down at your fingernails, and then back up at the city skyline. You look at the building with the diamond lights, or the really tall one, or the other really tall one, and you get lost in them.

“And this memory your mother shared... that is your only memory of me?”

You look at her, and whisper, “Yes.”

“And how long have you been with this Policeman?”

“Three hundred and twenty-seven days.”

“And this policeman, he thinks he can work out some sort of deal with these men to set you free?”

“Yes. He says soon.”

“He’s naïve then. We will always be monsters to them, do you understand?”

You will always just be a monster.

But your sister is a monster too.

So you nod.

“Now let me guess. Your policeman, he also stops you from using your gifts?”

You nod again.

“What you can do, is incredible,” Kali says, looking at you seriously, her fingers interlaced with one another in the shredded gloves that you wish you were wearing, too.

“it makes you very special, Jane.”

“Wait... do you have, a gift?”

“Different. I can make people see, or not see, whatever I choose.”

“Is... that why you made the man with the crazy hair dance?”

Kali laughs, “Axel is not so fond of spiders, so...”

“You made him see spiders?”

She nods.

Monsters together.

“But it doesn’t have to be scary.”

She opens her hand, and a beautiful butterfly, with different colors on the wings turning into one another over and over again, flies out.

“This butterfly, it isn’t real. I’ve just convinced your mind it is.

You watch it, and you’re transfixed. You can’t stop.

“Think of it as a kind of... magic.”

You try to catch it, but flies away. Kali catches it, opens her hand, and it’s gone.

You’re so confused.

Everything feels... blurry.

Like when you drink the alcohol.

Only without the swooping feelings in your stomach.

“Are you real?”

“Yes, I’m real.”

You reach out and poke her to make sure, and she smiles. And you smile. And you’re both laughing now, and that feeling is back.

That feeling of happiness.

Real happiness.

She looks at you for a minute after you stop poking each other, “Jane, would you like to stay here tonight?”

“Yes. Please,” you whisper, “I’m very... tired.”

“Alright. Let’s go back down.”

She leads you back into the warehouse, up to the office where she had been before. You sit on a bed, and she brings you a blanket.

Everything is so big, and wide, and open. Not like the Lab, where everything was small and squished – or the cabin, where it was small and crowded – or the woods, which were big, but felt small, because of the trees.

You like this.

But you’re so overwhelmed by... everything. By feeling happy. By feeling free. By feeling open. That you have a few tears in your eyes.

She’s smiling weirdly, and you look up at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is... wrong. I just feel... whole... now? Like, a piece of me was missing.”

She’s crying too.

“And now it’s not. Does that make sense?”

You nod.

“Yes.”

You feel like that too.

“I think your mother sent you here for a reason?” Kali is crying in full now, “I think she somehow knew that we belong together. I think this is your home.”

“Home,” you whisper.

“Yes. Home.”

“Yeah...”

And for the first time in a while, you fully believe it.

You turn, and you go into a long, deep sleep, finally feeling...

At least, a little bit...

Okay.

You dream that night. About Hopper.

About the Cabin.

He's been gone. He's not looking for you. And he's not mad at you anymore.

You feel...

Bad.

You're a monster.

When he comes back and doesn't find you, that's going to hurt him.

You don't want to hurt him.

But.

You're home now.

And.

And yet not.

And you're sorry too.

You wish you could have both.

You wish you could have Kali. And Mike.

And Hopper.

You're jolted awake.

"It's okay. It's only me."

Kali.

"Bad dream?"

You don't want to answer that.

"What time is it?"

"It's late. You slept well. Come. It's time you meet my friends – properly this time."

Oh no.

She leads you downstairs, and the crazy haired man walks up to you both immediately.

"We need more money, Kal. I can't keep eating this *garbage*."

"This is Axel."

"The spider hater?"

Everyone but Axel bursts into laughter.

"Yes, the spider hater," Kali snorts.

She points to the crazy haired lady.

"This is Dottie, our newest. Like you, she just left home."

"You mean the loony bin," Axel retorts.

Kali points to the poofy haired lady now, "Mick, our eyes, our protector."

She doesn't say anything.

Kalie leads you to the last person, the bald man.

“This is Funshine, our warrior.”

He walks up to you. He’s huge, and you don’t want him to attack you, like the Bad Men at the Lab –

“Don’t let his size frighten you. Fun’s a teddy bear.”

He reaches for your hand, and takes it.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Jane.”

Maybe they’re all like you? You turn his hand and look for a tattoo.

“If you’re looking for a number, you won’t find one,” Kali murmurs as she goes to sit down.

“They’re... not like us?”

“No, not in that way. But like us, they’re outcasts.”

“Outcasts?”

“Freaks,” Axel says. He has tattoos all over him.

“Speak for yourself,” Dottie snorts, but you have a feeling she’s a freak too.

“Society left them behind, hurt them, discarded them.”

“We were dead, all of us. Kali saved us,” Fun explains, “Here,” he points to his head, “And here.” He points to his heart.

“Don’t get all mushy on us now, Fun,” Kali snorts.

“No, not mushy. True.”

“Now, we help her,” Mick explains.

“In this life, kid, you roll over or you fight back,” Axel says.

“We’re all fighters here,” Mick agrees.

“Fight... who?”

Kali grins at you, gets up, and reaches into a cabinet. She pulls out a bunch of wallets and IDs and badges and drops them on the table.

“Everyone you see here was in some way responsible for what happened to us,” Kali explains.

You pick up a badge, and you recognize the face on it.

“You... hurt the Bad Men?”

“No, we just give ‘em a pat on the back,” Dottie says, but you have a feeling from how she says it that she’s joking.

“You... kill them?” you ask.

“They’re criminals,” Kali says, “We simply make them pay for their crimes.”

They go around.

And they kill people.

Monsters.

Monsters like you.

“Damn, Shirley. What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Axel taunts.

“We can’t all be fighters, I guess,” Dottie joins in.

No.

“I’m a fighter. I’ve killed,” you say, sternly.

You’re sick of everyone not treating you like who you are.

A Monster.

And you weren’t about to be *mocked* for not being one, either.

Not when you *are* a monster.

“These men you killed, did they deserve it?” Kali asks.

“They hurt me,” you say.

“And they still want to hurt you. To hurt *us*. We’re just making the first move.”

You like that idea.

“Come.”

Kali starts going outside, and you follow her, wondering what is going to happen next.

“I was just like you once. I kept my anger inside. I tried to hide from it, but then that pain... festered.”

“Festered?”

She turns to you and looks at you, a grimace on her face.

“Spread.”

You remember Mike’s wrists. And your vomit.

It already festered.

“Until finally I confronted my pain, and I began to heal.”

Healing sounds nice.

You watch her as she keeps going, until you’re in an empty train yard, behind the warehouse. Everything is run down, and broken, and falling apart.

Like you.

And like them.

“Do you see that train?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to draw it to us,” Kali says.

You turn to look at her, and she looks back.

You raise up your hand, and concentrate. You want the train to come forward, but it’s too heavy. It hurts too much to do it. Your mind is starting to burn again, just a little bit.

You’re too weak to do it, really.

You let go, and you gasp, and you hunch over.

“I can’t.”

“Last night you told me you lifted a van, once.”

“... yes.”

“The Bad Men were trying to take you away again, and that made you angry.”

You nod.

“Good. So, find that anger, focus on that, not the train, not its weight.” Kali explains.

Anger.

Okay.

You raise your arm again.

You think about the Bad Men.

“I want you to find something from your life. Something that *angers* you.”

Mike, hanging out with the Anne-girl.

Replacing... you.

“Now channel it.”

The train starts to move, a little.

“Dig deeper. Your whole life you’ve been lied to.”

Hopper, lying about Mama.

The train moves more.

“Imprisoned.”

Being tossed in the closet.

Hopper yelling at you in the Cabin.

The train comes faster.

“The bad men took away your home.”

You remember Mike.

Hurting himself.

Blood flowing down his arms.

“Your mother.”

Mama.

Being shocked.

Her mind going away.

“They took *everything from you*.”

You think of the Bad Men.

Shocking you.

Hitting you.

Touching you.

When you didn't want to be touched.

All the time.

Making you a Monster.

Dragging you away.

"They stole your life, Jane."

Finding the Monster.

Opening the Upside Down.

Hurting Will.

Killing Barb.

Touching. You.

You. Drinking.

Mike. Bleeding.

Mama. Screaming.

And you scream.

And you scream.

And you scream.

And you scream.

And the train comes towards you.

And you fall to the ground in pain.

The others are screaming, and cheering you.

But they don't know how you feel inside.

Everything feels numb again.

“So how do you feel?” Kali asks.

What are you supposed to say?

That you didn’t want to think about all that?

That letting it out felt... good.

But also bad.

Good and bad.

So good.

And so bad.

All at once.

But you don’t want Kali to know that.

You want Kali to accept you.

Because if you can’t be accepted by another Monster, who *would* accept you?

“Good.”

She leads you back inside, to a wall of papers of people with names and faces and their faces look familiar.

“These are the Bad Men, as you call them. The ones we believe are still alive. Do you know any?”

You look around.

You see the man. The man who hurt Mama. The man who turned her brain to mush.

“Him.”

“He hurt Mama.”

“His name is Ray Caroll. And he did more than hurt your mother. He

would shock me, with a rod. When I misbehaved.”

You look at her, and you nod.

“The bad men like Ray, they know about us. It’s made them hard to track. But maybe not anymore,” Kali looks at you.

You look at the paper.

And you fold it up tight.

“I need a blindfold, and static,” you say.

“Alright, let’s do it,” Kali agrees. You go back out to the big empty room, and a bandana is handed to you. You tie it tight around your head, and they turn on the radio, to between stations.

You search the Void.

You look everywhere.

You see a man, sitting in a chair. He watches TV.

You pull down the blindfold and look at them all, and you nod.

Kali nods back.

They pull out the phone book and find the place in there, and they start to discuss whether or not to go – it’s far away, and Mick seems scared.

You’re also scared.

But you don’t want to be.

You want to be Brave.

Like Kali.

Like Mike.

Like Hopper.

But then Mick says “screw it”.

They all get up, and start setting things up, and you pull Kali aside.

“Yes Jane?” she asks, “We have work to do –“

“I want to look like you all,” you murmur.

“You... what?”

“I want to look like you all. I want to... blend in. I want to feel strong,” you say quietly.

Look like how you feel on the inside. Dark, and angry, and unapproachable.

Like a Monster.

Kali looks at you for a long minute, before grinning.

“You sure?”

You nod.

“Yes.”

“Alright. Let’s do that too.” Kali brings you upstairs, with Dottie following behind, and she shows you coats.

“I have an idea, so if you don’t like it we can change it, but let me run with it first?” Kali asks. You nod eagerly. She holds up coats next to you, frowning, seemingly trying to decide. Dottie seems to be trying to decide what to do with your hair. Kali picks out more clothes, and you get changed, before Dottie sleeks back all your hair against your neck. Kali brings her make up, and puts it over your eyes and your lips, and your heart swoops in your stomach with excitement.

You look at yourself in the mirror.

You look strong.

You look... good.

Not pretty, really.

But good.

Older.

Wiser.

Ready to break the people that broke you.

The others come upstairs and look at you, nodding in approval.

“Bitchin’,” Kali grins.

You look at her, and decide that that must mean what you feel.

“Bitchin’.”

Everyone heads out to the car, but before you go, Kali holds you back.

“Jane.”

“Kali?”

“Do you want to kill him?”

You look at her for a while.

“Yes.”

Monsters destroy.

Monsters kill.

“Alright. If you can’t, I’ll do it, so no pressure, alright?”

You nod, and then you go outside together.

You all pile into an old van, and drive off through the streets of Chicago, until you’ve left the city and gone out into the woods again.

And everyone’s rocking out, and jamming in the car, and they’re so

happy and *excited* and you can't help but feel excited with them too.

You finally pull up to a run-down gas station. Everyone piles out of the car, and you have no idea what's going on.

"What are we doing?" you ask Kali softly.

"Stocking up."

You all pile into the shop, as Dottie already starts grabbing stuff.

"Hey. Your bathroom is leaking," Kali explains.

But it isn't –

She's making him see water –

The storeowner hops into the bathroom, and Kali grins at you.

Axel walks in front of the door and says in an undertone, "Okay contestants you have a minute and a half – let's begin your super market *sweep!*"

Oh.

You're going to take things.

You run through the store, looking around at the food. You see some Eggos in the fridge and you grab them happily.

Alcohol...

You run and grab a bottle of Vodka, stuffing it into your jacket before anyone notices. You grab a second, just in case.

Freedom.

It feels good.

But the store owner comes back out and threatens Axel. Kali tries to calm him down, but you're not going to let your sister get hurt. Not today.

Not after everything.

You walk up to him, you scream, and you knock him back into the door, unconscious.

“Damn, Shirley,” Axel gasps.

You grin to yourself.

Monster.

You could get into this.

Sirens wail, and you all run out back into the van, driving off into the fading light.

Night falls by the time you reach the man’s house.

“We should case the place, stick to the routine. We have time,” Mick says.

“We also have her. Can you look?” Kali asks.

You nod, and close your eyes. You already took a swig of Vodka as you all moved through the city while the others were talking.

You don’t know why you don’t want them to know. You have a feeling that they’d approve.

But it feels wrong to tell them.

You see him.

He’s sitting in front of the TV, alone, in a daze.

“He’s watching television,” you murmur.

“Is he alone?”

“I saw him. No one else,” you answer.

“Good enough for me,” Kali says.

“Me too,” Dottie agrees.

“Let’s do this,” Fun says.

You all put on your masks, and go up to the apartment building.

“Keep it running,” Kali orders Mick.

“Meet you around back,” Mick responds.

You open each door in your way easily, until you reach the locked door of the man’s apartment. You unlock it, Dottie giggling happily behind you, and Kali giving you a more silent smile as well.

It feels good.

It feels so good.

And you’re buzzing from the swig – buzz buzz buzz buzz –

You’re ready for this.

You’re ready to do this.

For Mama.

You turn off the TV.

You all head inside.

He’s fiddling with it.

“Hello, Ray,” Kali says.

“JESUS CHRIST –“

Fun stops him from running.

“Just, please... just take what you want.”

Axel and Dottie go for the wallet.

But you have a bigger job.

You and Kali approach him in his chair.

And she takes off her mask.

So you do the same.

“Do you remember us?”

He shakes his head.

Kali does something – the lights flicker – you think she’s making him see something –

“What about us? Do you remember us, Ray?” she asks, again.

She hits him.

You hate him.

He begs.

“You. Hurt. Mama,” you snarl.

And you throw him across the room.

You can’t believe how much you hate him.

The man who hurt Mama.

The man who made her brain mush.

He begs again.

Tries to justify.

You don’t even register the words.

You reach to kill him.

He keeps begging.

“I can... help. I can help you find him.”

What?

“Find who?” Kali asks.

“Brenner! I can take you to him.”

“Papa. Is. Gone,” you hiss.

“No. He is alive.”

“Do not lie to us, Ray,” Kali says.

“I’m not lying –“ he cries, “I swear...”

No.

No.

Papa can’t be alive.

No.

He’s not.

He’s *dead*.

That evil man is *dead*.

He’s dead.

He’s dead.

HE’S DEAD

HE’S DEAD

HE’S DEAD

“He trusts me... I’ll take you to him...”

“If he is alive, Jane will find him,” Kali snarls, “Just as she found you.”

You watch him.

Papa. Is. Dead.

He has to be dead.

“Do it, Jane.”

He hurt Mama.

“Do it.”

“Wait –“

You reach to strangle him.

You are a Monster.

And...

And...

And...

“Not too quick. He wasn’t so generous with your mother.”

You wish you could say that was why you are taking so long.

But something is holding you

You try harder.

You want to kill him.

You *want* to kill him.

You...

You think you do...

You’re so *angry*.

You’re so *angry* you’re a monster.

And this is what Monsters do, right?

His face turns purple.

You can do this.

You want to kill him.

You think you want to kill him.

And then you see a picture of his children.

He has... children.

You're not this kind of Monster.

This is not.

You're not.

No.

You let go.

No.

"What's wrong?" Kali asks, "What's wrong?"

The others come back.

The kids are here.

Shit.

You can't.

You're not that kind of Monster.

"Did he show your mother mercy? No."

Kali is right.

But you're still not this kind of Monster.

“He took her from you, without hesitation.”

But the kids didn’t do that.

It isn’t the fault of his kids.

And you all have to go –

And everything is too stressful –

And you just don’t want to do this –

“Jane, now!” Kali shouts at you.

But you can’t.

You aren’t this.

Kali pulls out her gun –

No –

You move it away –

You all run out of the apartment –

You’re in the van –

Kali turns to you.

“If you wanted to show mercy, that’s your choice.”

You sigh.

“But don’t you *ever* take away mine. Ever. Do you understand? Do you understand?”

You don’t say anything.

You just look away.

Choice.

You had a choice.

She pushed you, but she didn't force you.

Like she said.

And you forced her.

Maybe you are that kind of Monster.

No.

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

You don't.

You don't.

Know.

Who are you?

Who are you?

Who...

Who are you?

When you get back, you go into the room.

It's not bedtime yet, but you're tired.

And you have Hopper's shirt.

It smells like him.

Hopper didn't treat you like a Monster.

He hid you to keep you safe.

And he got mad at you when you broke the rules...

But he was scared.

You know that.

You knew that then.

That he was just scared.

Scared of you getting hurt.

He said that to you, many times.

So why did you hurt him back?

Are you a Monster?

Are you not?

What are you?

Kali is in the room.

“May I sit?”

You nod.

She comes in.

“I was once just like you, you know that? But that’s why I’m hard on you, because I see you in my past mistakes.”

Is it a mistake?

Or is it just being different from her?

“They were kids,” you murmur.

“Does that excuse that man’s sins? Were we not also children?”

No, but...

It's not that simple.

"I remember the day I came to the Rainbow Room and you were gone. So when my gifts were strong enough, I used them to escape. And I ran. I ran away as far as I could. And it was there, far away, that I found a place to hide. A family. A home. Just like you and your policeman. But they couldn't help me. So eventually I lost them, too."

Like you lost Mike.

And Hopper.

You lose everyone.

"So, I decided to play the part. To stop hiding. To my use my gifts against those who hurt us."

But is it worth it?

"You're now faced with the same choice, Jane. Go back into hiding, and hope they don't find you... or fight, and face them again."

"Face who?"

You don't want to face anyone.

You just want to feel like...

When you and Mike kissed.

Or when you and Hopper played games.

Or when you and Kali hugged.

You just want to feel like that again.

Human.

"The man who calls himself our father."

No.

"Papa. Is. Dead."

“That man tonight disagreed.”

Chills.

Chills.

Chills run from your toes to your head.

Everything turns to ice.

Your stomach sinks.

It's like there's a weight on your chest.

Papa.

You turn and you immediately shut down.

You don't.

Think.

“You're not real,” you whimper.

“All this time? And you haven't looked for me? Why?”

You wish you were dead.

You'd rather be dead.

Than see this.

"Because you thought I was dead? Or because you were afraid of what you might find?"

"Go away," you whisper.

You want to die.

You want to die.

You want to die.

You want to die.

"You have to confront your pain."

No you don't.

"You have a wound, Eleven. A terrible wound."

And it's going to kill you and you're okay with that.

Just go away.

Go away.

Go away.

"And it's festering."

Yes.

Let it fester.

You want to die.

"Do you remember what that means? Festering?"

Yes.

You want to die.

“It means a rot. And it will grow.”

Okay.

You’re okay with that.

“Spread.”

You can’t.

You can’t.

Go away.

Go away.

“Get out of my head –“

“And eventually, it will kill you.”

FINE.

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

Papa disappears.

Everything hurts.

Everything.

This is worse than anything before.

Kali kneels before you.

“This isn’t a prison, Jane. You’re always free to return to your policeman.”

Are you, though?

Are you ever free?

Free from this?

Free from yourself?

“Or stay. And avenge your mother.”

She smiles at you.

But it doesn't cheer you up.

“Let us heal our wounds, together.”

Can you heal with her?

She leaves.

You want to heal.

But you can't heal.

And you don't want her to waste her time on you.

You drink.

You take the vodka from your stash and you drink as much as you can – you don't want to get sick.

Flash.

In.

Out.

Void.

Flash.

Void.

Warehouse.

Void.

Warehouse.

Void.

Warehouse.

Void.

Warehouse.

You smell the shirt.

You remember Mike.

And Dustin.

Mike.

Telling you you aren't a monster.

Hopper.

Void.

You want to find your friends.

Hopper is standing by a beeping machine.

He's crying.

He's upset.

"That's where I was. It's a damn graveyard."

You turn around –

Mike is running –

"I need to get through, I need to get through – I need to warn them –
It's a trap!"

He's being held back –

“I need to get through, it’s a trap, I need to tell them it’s a trap!”

He’s in trouble –

You scream his name –

“It’s a trap! It’s a trap!”

You reach for him –

You scream again –

You wave your arms right through him –

Mike –

Mike –

Mike –

Mike –

Mike is in trouble –

You’re brought back to the warehouse.

There’s banging.

Something is happening.

Kali grabs you, and you escape. He makes them not see you. The policemen, who want to find Kali’s family.

Kali’s family.

But it’s not your family.

You don’t belong here.

At least.

You don’t think you do.

You all run out to the van.

You don't have any of your things, but you don't care.

She makes them stop again, and everyone crawls into the van, and she calls you.

"Jane, get in."

Hopper.

Hopper and Mike.

They need you.

They need you.

They need you.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but I have to go back," you whisper, "My friends – my friends are in *danger* – "

"This isn't time for a talk, we got to go *right now!*" Axel roars.

"Your mother sent you here for a reason, remember?" Kali begs, "We belong together."

Do you?

"There's nothing for you back there. They cannot save you, Jane."

"No. But I can save them," you whisper.

You don't deserve to be saved.

But they did.

You start running away, and Kali calls after you, and you keep going and going even though you're crying.

And you run through the streets, with your money in your pockets.

It doesn't help that the vodka still burns in your veins.

And you can barely think straight.

You hop from train to train until you reach the bus depot again.

You buy a ticket.

Three hours back.

You'll be in Hawkins by midnight.

And you stare out the window of the bus, wishing...

Wishing...

Wishing Kali was different.

N O V E M B E R 5 1 9 8 4

You follow the sounds of the monsters.

You know they're going to be going after Hop and Mike.

And you know you need to save them.

You run through the town, hitching a ride part of the way, not really caring at the weird looks you get from others.

They're going to the Byers' house.

You keep going after them, stopping just outside of the house. You watch as they all start to approach.

You kill one of them instantly.

They all turn to face you.

They look like the monster from the year before, but on all fours, and smaller.

You throw another one into a third.

You break the neck of a fourth.

They scream and whine with every hit, and they surround you and roar at you.

You don't really care anymore.

Monster or not.

You don't care.

These are more monster than you, at least.

You throw a fifth through the window of the house as it comes up to attack you.

And a sixth, you fling into the trees.

Seven and eight? You snap their necks again.

Nine and ten are smashed to a pulp.

And eleven, twelve, and thirteen are choked again.

And you kill every single last one of them until they're gone.

You lean over, panting, holding your hands against your knees, before you make your way through the yard.

You walk up to the door, and you unlock it, slowly, with your mind.

Your heart pounds in your neck.

Your mind spins in your head.

This has all been too much to handle.

But you have to go in there.

And you creak the door open.

And you step inside.

And they're all there.

All of them.

Your whole family.

Plus Anne, and some guy with weird poofy hair you've never seen.

But the rest of them are there.

And they're all alive.

And you're flooded with relief.

And you see Mike.

And he's *there*.

And he's *alive*.

And he sees you. And you see him.

Mike.

And you can't help but smile.

Because you finally feel like you're home.

Mike is there.

Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

And he's smiling at you.

Actually, really, properly smiling.

Maybe it'll all be okay.

Maybe *you'll* be okay.

Maybe you need a different way to heal than Kali.

You walk towards him slowly, and he walks towards you, until you trip into each other.

And you hold him as tightly as you can, and he's bigger now, but so are you, and he's warm, and he's alive, and he's kind of lanky, and you don't care, you don't care at all, because he's still Mike, and your heart is pounding in a good way, and your stomach is swooping in a good way, and everything is fluttering in a good way, from your knees to your stomach.

Such a good way.

Maybe this is love.

You hope you can tell him.

Mike.

He pulls back from you, just looking at you with that face again.

The one that makes your stomach swoop?

"I never gave up on you. I called you every night. Every night for –"

"Three-hundred and fifty-three days," you say before he finishes.

He looks at you in shock.

"I heard," You answer.

Please don't be mad.

"Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?" Mike says, tears in his eyes, looking so broken you remember again that it's your fault and you're a Monster and Monsters don't get to feel love –

"Because I wouldn't let her."

Hop.

And you know you've hurt him too.

And it hurts to see him, too.

But you have to hug him, because it's Hop, and the last time you saw him you hated him, but you don't hate him anymore.

He was just trying.

Trying to keep you safe.

You know that.

You know that, and it's okay.

It's all okay.

"The hell is this? Where've you been?"

"Where have *you* been?" you insist, because he hasn't been at the cabin the same time as you.

And you hug.

And you feel safe again.

Mike and Hop help you feel safe again.

"You've been hiding her."

Oh no.

Mike.

"You've been hiding her this whole time –"

Mike hits Hop.

Hop stops him.

"Hey – let's *talk!* Alone." Hop insists, and he drags Mike away, and you look at everyone else.

Dustin and Lucas rush forward immediately and hug you.

And this feels like home, too.

They all feel like home.

“We missed you,” Lucas says, and it’s nice to hear him say it.

So nice.

“I missed you too,” you murmur back.

“We talked about you pretty much every day,” Dustin laughs.

You all pull back from each other.

Dustin is smiling – what the –

You reach out for his face –

“Teeth?”

“What?”

“You have teeth...”

Dustin grins even more.

“Oh, you like these pearls?” and he makes a weird sound.

You missed him a lot.

And Lucas.

You missed both of them so much.

Anne walks forward, saying Eleven.

Oh great.

Your replacement.

“Hey. Um, I’m Max. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Fine, she’s Max, not Anne.

Whatever.

You see Mrs. Byers and you walk straight for her. She holds you in her arms immediately and hugs you tightly, and you burst into more tears.

You missed her too.

You missed everyone *so much*.

Some ice manages to ebb away.

Just a little.

You pull back from her and whisper, "Can I see him?"

Mrs. Byers sighs, and leads you back into another room.

Will is asleep on the bed.

He doesn't look like Will.

He looks like a shell.

And it hurts.

It hurts to know this is all your fault.

Still.

Jane the monster.

"He's not doing well," Mrs. Byers whispers.

"I know," you murmur, "I saw."

"What else did you see?"

You swallow. You go back out to the kitchen.

C L O S E G A T E is written down.

You know.

You know.

This is how you'll fix it.

This is how you'll *actually* make up for being a monster.

Last year wasn't good enough.

But this will be.

"You – you opened this gate before, right?" Mrs. Byers asks.

"Yes," you whisper.

You hate that you did.

"Do you think if we got you back there, that – that you could close it?"

You can hear how desperate she is.

Well.

You would try, anyway.

Try for Will.

You look at her.

"Yes."

A door opens, and Hop and Mike come back out, and Mike rushes over to you as quickly as he can. He grabs your hand, and squeezes it tight.

He's not mad.

Good.

Before you can stop yourself, you reach up, and feel for the scars.

They're there.

You didn't imagine them.

You didn't imagine that he was doing that to himself.

You look up at him, and you can't stop yourself from starting to cry, and he looks at you, and stay there for a minute, heart shattered into the smallest of pieces, before turning back to everyone.

"I have to close the gate," you mutter, looking at Hopper.

Mike pulls back from you as you walk over to Hopper.

"It's not like it was before. It's grown," Hopper shakes his head, "A lot. And I mean, that's considering we can get in there. The place is crawling with those... dogs."

"Demo-dogs," Dustin says.

"I'm sorry, what?" Hopper frowns. He looks... off.

"I said, uh, Demo-dogs. Like Demogorgon and... dogs. Like, you put them together, it sounds pretty badass..."

"How is this *important* right now?"

"it's not, I'm sorry –"

"I can do it," you whisper.

"You're not hearing me," Hopper says.

"I'm hearing you. I can do it," you insist.

"Even if El can, there's still another problem," Mike sighs, "If the brain dies, the body dies."

"I thought that was the whole point?" An- Max asks.

"It is, but if we're really right about this... I mean, if El closes the gate and kills the mind flayer's army..."

"Will's a part of that army," Lucas gasps.

"Closing the gate will kill him," Mike says.

Mrs. Byers gets up, walking away. Everyone starts to follow her.

A hand is in yours.

You look.

It's Mike.

You squeeze his hand.

Mrs. Byers is talking to the others, trying to figure out how to save Will –

But all you can think about is how Mike's hand in yours makes you feel braver.

You can do this.

You can close the gate.

You're going to close the gate.

Hopper is looking at you, and you meet his eyes.

"The cabin," he whispers.

You swallow.

You're not going back there, you hope.

"The cabin?" Mrs. Byers asks.

"Where I hid El this year. Jonathan, Joyce –"

They all start moving around rapidly, and you go and you sit with Mike, and you keep holding his hand as you sit at the table, until Hopper comes in, nodding at you to leave.

It's time to do this.

You follow Hopper outside, and Mike follows you, and you turn to face him.

“Just be careful, okay?” Mike begs, “I can’t lose you again.”

You swallow. He looks so desperate.

No.

You won’t do that to him again.

“You won’t lose me.”

“Do you promise?” Mike asks, crying.

“Promise.”

You want to kiss him.

You want to tell him how... how you feel.

You lean up.

He’s looking at you, and you’re both crying, and your heart is pounding, and his lips are parting, and you can feel him breathing, and he smells... like Mike, like safety and home and happiness, and you are kind of shaking from head to foot and oh man oh man oh man oh man –

“El... Come on. Let’s go. It’s time.”

You turn to Hopper, and turn back to Mike, and you wish you could take him with, but it’s not safe.

“Okay,” Mike whispers.

You nod at him.

You try to not cry.

And you go into the car.

And your heart breaks to have left him. So you watch him out the window until you can’t see him anymore.

It’s a long time before Hopper talks to you.

“So, what, we’re just not gonna talk about it, huh?”

You don’t know how to explain everything.

You just don’t.

Not yet.

Not now.

“About what,” you mutter, hoping playing dumb will get you out of this.

You can’t think about Kali without hurting.

“Oh, I don’t know, I’m just curious, you know, why all of a sudden you look like some kind of MTV punk.”

Of course he goes straight to that.

“I’m not mad, kid. I just want to know where you’ve been. That’s all.”

Later.

You’ll tell him later.

When this is all over.

“To see Mama.”

You’ll give him that much, for now.

Kali still hurts.

Kali still hurts.

Kali still... hurts.

Hopper is silent for a bit.

“Okay...”

That wasn’t what he was expecting, and you know it.

“How’d you get there?”

“A truck.”

“A *truck*?”

“A big truck.”

“A big truck? Whose truck *was* it?”

“A man’s.”

“A *man*’s?”

“A nice man.”

More silence.

Then...

“Okay, so let me just get this straight in my head. So a nice man in a big truck, he drove you to your Mama’s and then what? Your Aunt Becky gave you those clothes and that makeup?”

That’s not the point.

That’s not what you want to say right now.

“I... I shouldn’t have left.”

Kali was a mistake.

Kali just reminded you...

You shouldn’t have left.

Hopper shakes his head, tears in his eyes too.

“No... No this isn’t on you, kid. I should’ve been there. I should never have lied to you about your mom. Or about when you could leave. A lot of things I shouldn’t have done.”

It hurt.

But it also helped.

Bandages on your shattered heart.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m... Like I’m just some kind of black hole or something.”

“A black hole?”

“Yeah, it’s a... you know, it’s this thing in outer space. It’s like, it sucks everything towards it and destroys it.”

You understand.

You’re a black hole, too.

“Sarah had a picture book about outer space. She loved it.”

Sarah?

“Who’s Sarah?”

“Sarah? Sarah’s my girl. She’s my little girl.”

Why had you never met her?

Was it because you’re a monster, and he wanted to keep Sarah safe?

A black hole?

That would have sucked her up and destroyed her like everything else?

“Where is she?”

“Well, that’s kind of the thing, kid. She, uh... She left us.”

Oh.

“Gone.”

“Yeah.”

Dead.

“The black hole. It got her. And somehow... I’ve just been scared, you know? I’ve just been scared that it would take you, too.”

He wasn’t Papa.

He was...

Hop.

And he was just trying to help you.

And you know that now.

“I think that’s why I get... so *mad*.”

Like Kali.

He and Kali both were hurt.

But he tries to protect you.

And Kali...

Kali just hurt you too.

On accident.

She was trying to help you... because she thought you would need what she needs...

But she just hurt you instead.

And the same thing happened with Hop.

“I’m so sorry. For everything.”

You’re crying again.

“I could be so... so...”

“Stupid?” you offer.

“Yeah,” he laughs, “Stupid.”

You laugh too.

“Just really... stupid.”

You reach out and hold his hand, and he holds yours and squeezes it.

“I’ve been stupid, too,” you murmur.

“I guess we broke our rule,” Hop comments.

You laugh again.

Laughing is nice.

“I don’t hate it, by the way. This whole... look. It’s kinda cool.”

You smile.

You still like it, too.

“Bitchin’.”

“O... kay. Sure. Bitchin’.”

And you laugh together again.

“Can I get more like this?”

“More...”

“Clothes. Makeup.”

He laughs.

“If you do this, kid, I’ll get you whatever clothes you want.”

You smile again.

“I’m... sorry. Too. I shouldn’t have left,” you murmur.

“It’s in the past, kid. No need to keep... going over it.”

You stare out in front of you.

“I have a sister.”

“You... what?”

“Another... kid. In the Lab.”

“Oh...”

“I found her.”

“... Where?”

“Chicago.”

“*Chicago?*”

“Chicago.”

“What... how...”

“I took a bus.”

“Okay...”

“And... she’s killing the Bad Men.”

“She’s – *what?*”

“She’s killing the Bad Men. And she wanted me to kill one.”

“Did... you?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because... I’m not that kind of Monster.”

“What? El, you’re not any monster –“

“I’m a Monster.”

“El...”

“But he had kids.”

“Oh...”

“So I didn’t.”

“Good, kid. Good.”

“Good?”

“Good.”

You nod, staring out in front of you as you drive up to the lab.

“We can talk more about this... later,” Hopper pauses.

“Okay,” you turn to him.

“What, kid? We gotta go in there...”

“I love you,” you say, quietly.

He’s the first person you’ve said that too.

Hopper’s crying again as he looks at you.

Did you say something wrong?

“I love you too, kid. Let’s do this.”

You nod, and he parks, and you both get out of the car, and start walking up to the lab.

And it all hits you all at once.

Getting dragged into closets.

Getting hit by Bad Men.

Getting *touched* by Bad Men, in places you did not want to be touched.

Being forced to kill.

Being turned into a Monster.

A dirty, disgusting Monster.

Hopper grabs his gun.

“All right. You let me do the heavy lifting up front, all right? You save your strength till we’re below.”

You don’t say anything.

“You okay?”

You still say nothing.

You just go inside.

You walk through the dark hallways of the Lab, overwhelmed with all the dead bodies and blood. But you’re ready.

You’re going to do this.

You ignore how everything makes you feel.

Ignore.

Ignore.

Ignore.

You’re on stairs and there’s a grunt.

So much blood.

It fills your nostrils and makes you feel sick.

And you’re still a little buzzed but you’re ignoring that.

Hopper goes on ahead.

“Hey, Doc,” you hear him say.

You follow him quietly.

“Those suckers got you pretty good, huh?”

You walk up behind him as he works on a man in a white coat you’ve never seen before. Or at least, you don’t remember seeing him.

“Oh yeah, I’ve been meaning to tell you. This is Eleven. Eleven, Doc Owens. Doc Owens, Eleven.”

You swallow.

This is another Bad Man.

... Right?

“She’s been staying with me for about a year, and she’s about to save our asses. Maybe when this is all said and done, maybe you could help her out too, you know? Maybe you could help her lead, like, a normal life. One where she’s not poked and prodded and... treated like some kind of lab rat, you know? I don’t know, just a thought. But, uh... think about it.”

The man nods.

Hop gets up.

And you follow him without looking back.

You don’t feel like hoping.

Not right now.

And you head down, down into that hallway, where you spent too much time, and everything feels awful, and you keep following Hop as you move, and you hear monsters –

So he goes ahead –

You don’t want him to go –

You don’t want him to die –

But you let him because... he wants you to.

He swears under his breath.

You decide you're going to fight too, as soon as he moves out of the way –

He runs into the room –

He goes to shoot the monsters and you follow him –

All the monsters scream in pain and go back, back into the big hole –

You walk up to him –

His walkie hisses.

“Chief, are you there? Chief, do you copy –“

“Yeah, I copy.”

You're just in awe right now. Both of you are.

“Close it.”

You look at Hop, who looks at you.

And you climb into the lift, to go down to the hole.

To close it.

And your heart pounds so loudly in your throat you feel sick.

You are so scared you can't think straight.

You have to do this.

You have to.

You have to.

You have to make it right again.

But you reach out for Hopper's hand anyway, and he squeezes yours tightly.

At least he's with you.

You nod at each other as he stops the lift.

You let go of his hand, reluctantly.

You have to fix this.

You have to fix this.

You have to fix this.

You have to fix this.

The gate is huge and red and evil and you have to fix it.

You hold up your hand.

And you focus.

And immediately, everything hurts. Everything burns. Your brain is on fire. Your brain is *screaming*. Your head is *screaming*. Your chest is *screaming* in pain.

But you keep your hand up.

Something growls.

You keep your hand up.

A shadow looms.

You keep your hand up.

The gate starts to shrink.

You keep your hand up.

Everything *aches like hell*.

You keep your hand up.

It feels like pins and needles stabbing you everywhere.

You keep your hand up.

Your nose is burning.

You keep your hand up.

The monster roars again.

You keep your hand up.

Your eyes are stinging.

You keep your hand up.

But it's not working.

You remember the train.

You think about Kali.

Anger.

You need anger.

Getting dragged and locked in a hole.

The gate closes faster.

Getting touched where you didn't want to be touched and feeling dirty forever and not even being able to *think* about *anything* that reminded you of it.

The gate closes faster.

Blood flowing down Mike's arm and him passing out.

The gate closes faster.

Mama getting burned and her brain turning to mush.

The gate closes faster.

Hop calling you a brat and screaming at you.

The gate closes faster.

Kali showing you Papa and not stopping even though you told her too.

The gate closes faster.

Your eyes are stinging so hard.

Your nose hurts so much.

Everything hurts all over.

Monsters are starting to attack you.

Hopper holds them back.

The gate keeps closing.

You keep thinking of things that made you mad.

Of Papa.

Of Kali.

Of Mike.

Of Hop.

Of Mama.

Of You.

Close it.

Close it.

Close it.

Close it.

You opened the gate.

You hurt all these people.

You are a Monster.

And you have to fix it.

You have to fix it.

You have to fix it.

Smoke comes towards you, trying to attack you.

But you are the wrong Monster to attack.

And you hold it back.

And your whole face just burns.

And you start to scream from the pain.

But you hold back the smoke.

You hold back the other Monster.

And you're floating off the ground.

And your arms are both in the air

And you keep closing the gate even though it feels like your face is going to shatter.

And like your eyes are going to pop out of your head.

And like your nose is going to explode.

And like your lungs are going to collapse.

And like your heart is going to fall out.

And your head is going to burn up.

And the smoke all goes away

And the gate closes up and shrinks until the monster is gone and everything is sealed away as you scream and scream and scream and scream and scream –

And it's done.

And you collapse.

And for a second, you're gone.

And then you open your eyes, and you see that Hopper's caught you.

And you're crying so hard.

"You did good, kid. You did so good," hopper whispers.

You hold as tightly to him as you can.

Just waiting until it all stops burning.

And, for now, that's all you can do.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright so -

Full confession:

I don't hate Kali.

I think she's a very vital character and very important for El's development.

Do I think what she did with the Brenner hallucination was abusive? Absolutely.

But I don't think that makes her character irredeemable. I think it means that she's also a kid - sixteen, maybe seventeen at the oldest - and she is

DESPERATE for family. Yeah, her little gang is like a family, but I'm pretty sure she wishes she had someone around who gets it. That's why she clings to El so quickly. She wanted family, but that got destroyed - so maybe now she can have it and not lose it. And then it looks like El doesn't want to live like she does, so she IS going to lose it after all. Not that she has a right to El because they're sisters - not at all - just explaining what I think her thought process is, and why she'd be driven to such a desperate and cruel move.

And, Gd dammit, I fucking love Punk!El and I'm keeping that look for her because it works. I don't think it's sexualizing her - that outfit is VERY gender neutral and, honestly, if you had given me a picture of Punk!El and told me she was a boy I'd believe you, so I don't buy that complaint either.

FINALLY I CAN MOVE ON TO FUCKING ORIGINAL CONTENT AGAIN. I'm so excited. You have no idea. Everyone get pumped with me. It's going to be a good time.

Please comment!!! Please!!! SO MANY WORDS. I need comments haha.

9. Step One

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for mentions of self-harm and underage drinking

N O V E M B E R 5 1 9 8 4

M I K E W H E E L E R

Steve insists on driving you all back.

You sit in silence, staring out the window, exhaustion overwhelming you as you drive through Hawkins, looking out the window and wishing that you could stay awake.

Because you need to see that El's okay.

Dustin is the only other person awake – Lucas and Max have fallen asleep on each other's shoulders. You don't really say a word; you just try to keep breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

Eventually the car pulls back up to the Byers house, and you climb out of it, limping with pain.

"Mike? What's up? Did the vine hurt you?" Steve asks, following you closely as Dustin wakes the others awake.

"Uh... yeah, a little," you mutter, but you feel like it's probably from your thigh more than anything.

"Alright, well just rest in the kitchen. We'll wait for the others to

come back there.”

You nod, but you first make a beeline for the bathroom. You lock the door behind you and look at your thigh, eyes widening as you do so.

The bandage is *basically* soaked in blood.

Well fuck.

Running on adrenaline does hellish things to one’s pain perception, you guess.

You take off the bandage and dab at the wounds with a paper towel, grimacing to yourself as you try to get it to stop up again. Falling must have broken it open or something? You don’t know. Maybe it was all the vines or the shimmying or... you don’t know.

You tie the bandage around tighter, so tight it hurts too.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit.

Shit.

Shit shit.

Shit.

“Mike? Mike? Can you open up in there I gotta pee!” Dustin shouts.

Shit shit.

“Just a second!” you scream back, putting your pants back on and washing your hands quickly before exiting the bathroom.

Dustin gives you a look.

“What?” you ask, glaring at him.

“You’ve got blood on your nose, man,” Dustin says quietly, going back into the bathroom without another word.

You remember Will’s – actual Will, not Monster-Take-Over-Will – words in the Lab.

You take a deep breath and just sit down in the living room, trying to sit still, but your leg is bouncing so much you think it's going to fall off.

"Kid, could you knock it off? Jesus," Steve sighs.

"Oh let him bounce," Lucas mumbles, falling asleep on the floor. Max is on the other couch, and she's already asleep, buried under a pile of blankets.

"Yeah, he sees El for the first time in a year, just to say goodbye to her going off to defeat the impossible evil!" Dustin says as he leaves the bathroom, "Let Mike Bounce."

Lucas sits up a little and looks at Dustin, grinning, and Dustin grins back.

"Guys –" Steve protests, but he's too late.

"LET MIKE BOUNCE!" Dustin and Lucas say in unison.

"This is not helpful –"

"LET MIKE BOUNCE!"

"For fuck's sake –"

"LET MIKE BOUNCE!"

"THIS NIGHT HAS BEEN ROUGH ENOUGH AS IT IS!"

"LET MIKE BOUNCE!"

"COULD YOU BOTH SHUT UP?"

"LET MIKE BOUNCE!"

"WHAT DID I DO TO YOU TWO –"

"LET MIKE BOUNCE!"

"I KEEP YOU KIDS SAFE –"

“LET MIKE BOUNCE!”

“I TRY TO PUNCH OUT THE RACIST –“

“LET MIKE BOUNCE!”

“I GET KNOCKED OUT –“

“LET MIKE BOUNCE!”

“I SET FIRE TO A BUNCH OF FUCKING SUPERNATURAL TUNNELS
–“

“LET MIKE BOUNCE!”

“I LURE FUCKING DEMO-DOGS TO MY LOCATION –“

“LET MIKE B-“

But they're cut off as the door opens.

Truthfully, you've been so distracted by this ridiculous display you stopped bouncing, but now you bounce – to your feet, running towards the door with your heart in your throat.

It's the Byers.

Jonathan comes in, with Will being carried between him and Mrs. Byers. Nancy's behind him, and she is soaked in sweat.

You immediately run to her and you both hug tightly, her pulling away and looking at you in confusion.

“Where did you all go?”

Steve groans, drawing Nancy's attention to him.

“What... happened to your face?”

Jonathan joins in on the disbelief, “Why the hell is Billy Hargrove passed out on our floor?”

“I... can explain,” Steve says, looking pained to be talking.

“This should be interesting,” Dustin laughs.

“Shut up,” Steve groans, “Okay, so I was keeping these fucking shitheads safe here –“

“Hey!” Lucas protests.

“And then Max’s fucking *psychopath* of a step-brother comes to collect her, and like, he’s a racist dickbag, so I’m not going to let him probably abuse Lucas and Max to death, so I fight him –“

“Knew that guy was trouble,” Jonathan mutters.

“But I... uh... well basically he pummeled me,” Steve admits.

“That explains the face,” Nancy sighs.

Will and Mrs. Byers watch together in a corner, Will looking absolutely exhausted, but at least he was standing there, alive, and amazed at Steve’s story.

So at least you get some partial relief while you wait.

“And so then I wake up, and these *idiotic shitheads* –“

“We saved everyone, thank you *very* much –“

“Are *driving* –“

“Max had driven before!”

“*To the god-damned tunnels* –“

“We had to lure the –“

“To get the whole Demo-Dog army away from Eleven and the Chief –“

“Oh my God, you didn’t,” Nancy groans.

“So we went down into the tunnels and we basically covered the center of them in gas, and then I lit it on fire, and that lured all the things away from there... so... that probably helped I guess?”

"That... explains some things," Jonathan admits.

"Huh?" you ask.

"Well, we were basically setting Will on fire at one point, and the thing still wasn't coming out of him, but then all of a sudden it all came flying out. Might have been when you lit the tunnels on fire," Jonathan explains.

"Ah," Steve frowns.

"See! Told you we had to do this!" you shout.

"We were nearly all killed you idiot –"

"It's still good we lured away the Demo-Dogs and distracted the army, man," Dustin interjects.

Mrs. Byers is just shaking her head, looking amazed more than anything. Will is slumped against her shoulder, his eyes closed and his breathing slow.

"I think I'm going to go put Will to bed and keep an eye on him," she murmurs, "He needs rest. And so do all of you –"

"As much as that's true, you know that's crap, Mike's not gonna sleep until El gets back," Nancy sighs.

"Right, well, try to keep it down out here," Mrs. Byers says, before leading Will off to Will's room. Jonathan follows quietly, leaving the rest of you out here.

"You can go with them too, Nancy," you say softly. Nancy shakes her head.

"They should be alone. They've been through a lot," Nancy pauses, "And I should be here for you, while you wait."

"You don't –"

"I do."

You nod, and Nancy sits next to you, reaching out and holding your hand. It distracts you enough that you don't have to bounce.

"I'm sorry, Nance, there wasn't really anything I could do to stop them once they'd passed out," Steve sighs.

"Since you guys probably saved all of our lives, I'm surprisingly not mad," Nancy rolls her eyes.

"What do we do with the passed out racist though?" Dustin says idly, taking an apple from the table where a good amount of the food from the fridge is spread about.

"Uh... good question," Steve grimaces.

"Maybe you could drive him and Max back to their house?" Nancy suggests softly.

"I think that's a terrible idea," Lucas mutters.

"Yeah, not a good call," Steve pauses, "We could all drag him back out to his car until he wakes up or something?"

"How'd you knock him out anyway if you were being pummeled?" Nancy folds her arms across her chest and smirks.

"Uh... I'm not quite sure on that detail actually," Steve grimaces.

"Max shot him up with the stuff we used to make Will sleep," you explain.

"Ah..."

"Well that means we have time until he wakes up," Nancy pauses, "I say we leave him on the floor. The car's too cold."

"Isn't that what he deserves though?" Lucas snorts.

"Probably, but I'm not in the mood to commit murder right now," Nancy shakes her head, "We'll leave him here and then bring him out when it's light out."

"I think maybe someone should drive him and Max back to their house and then wake him up, or something?" you suggest.

"There's a big problem in all of this, namely, what do we say to Max's *parents*," Dustin groans.

"I'll figure that out," Max mumbles sleepily, looking up from her couch at last.

"When – when did you wake up?" Lucas asks, startled.

"When you idiots were chanting 'let Mike bounce', I've been trying to fall back asleep but it's a lost cause," Max grumbles in annoyance, sitting up.

"What are you going to say to your parents?" Nancy sighs.

"I have no clue, but I'll figure something out. Something about Will being sick and me wanting to be there for him or some crap? It's not far from the truth," Max pauses, "The real question is explaining why Billy is... like this."

"Maybe we should call your parents now, since they'll be worried. Just say that he tried to drag you away and Steve beat him up," Nancy smirks.

"They'll... just get mad..."

"I don't really care much, honestly," Nancy sighs, "Steve, help me fix the phone?"

They both walk into the living room as you start bouncing again. Your leg stings, but less so, so you hope that the tighter bandage is working.

Max follows Nancy and Steve to the phone while Lucas watches her with a worried expression etched into his face. Dustin starts pacing, kicking up bits of broken glass left on the floor as he does so.

"The wait is killing me," you mutter.

"Yeah, it's not great for us either," Lucas agrees.

“Hopper’s bringing her back here... right?” Dustin frowns.

You all look at each other in shock.

“He has to. After all this, he has to,” you shake your head.

“He doesn’t have to do anything, he kept her hidden away for a year –“

“Yeah but the cabin is probably completely wrecked after getting the spy out of Will –“

“He knows we’ll want to see her and make sure she’s okay, though...”

“Someone should radio him –“

Shouts could be heard from the other room.

“I KNOW, MOM, BUT NO ONE ELSE WAS LEAVING –“

“Shit,” Lucas mutters, “I should go help Max...”

“Maybe leaving her alone would be best right now,” Dustin sighs.

You, meanwhile, are searching hurriedly for a walkie around the room, finding one on a table and turning it to the right channel.

“Chief? Chief?” you shout into it, your heart pounding in your chest.

“Copy – we’re on our way back – over –“ Hop comes in almost immediately.

“To the Byers’, right? Not the cabin? Over,” you mutter.

“Yes, Byers. Over.”

“Copy,” you breathe with relief. And it sounds like El is alive.

Thank God.

“See? Now you can stop bouncing,” Steve mutters as he walks back into the room.

“How’s Max?” Lucas asks.

“She’s still talking to her parents. They’re not happy, but I’m sure you’ve figured that out,” Steve shakes his head, “Nancy’s keeping her company while she tries to talk it out.”

You nod, staring at the door and waiting. You can’t stop yourself from bouncing anyway.

“Must I be tortured forever,” Steve groans.

“Just until El gets back,” you mutter in response, watching the door needfully.

You spend a little while longer bouncing, Dustin and Lucas chitchatting with each other tiredly as Steve goes back to Nancy and Max. Your heart is still in your throat.

You just want to see her.

The sound of the door unlocking pulls you out of your thoughts faster than anything else really could. You immediately jump up, running to the door as it opens. Hop stumbles through, holding up El with his arms. She looks awful – weird dark lines etched into her face, her eyes bloodshot, her upper lip covered in blood.

She looks at you and smiles.

And you smile back, tears falling from your eyes immediately.

“I wanted to take her back to the cabin, but she insisted,” Hop mutters, not even stopping El as she stumbles forward and collapses onto you.

Safe.

You’re safe.

Finally all safe now.

Dustin and Lucas crowd around you both too, and you all hug each other, crying in varying degrees of intensity and loudness.

"I'm assuming one of you can tell me *why* all those monsters conveniently ran away?" Hop demands, pulling you out of the feeling of relief.

"I can explain..." Dustin says, grinning.

"Alright Chief," Steve sighs, coming back from Nancy and Max, "Basically..."

He fills Hopper in on what happened, as you take El back to the couch and sit down with her. She slumps against your shoulder, nuzzling her head into your neck and breathing softly.

"I did it," she mumbles.

"Yeah," you whisper, "Yeah, you did."

"Kid did good," Hopper says, his own eyes kind of watery as he walked back over to you, sitting down on the other side of El, "Kid did excellently."

"Does this mean more clothes?" El mumbles sleepily.

Hop shakes his head in bemusement.

"Yeah, kid, sure."

You wrap your arm around El as she nuzzles further into your chest, just holding her tightly. This is all you need, really. All you need.

"I'll call the schools... make some excuses for you all tomorrow. It's –" Hop looks at his watch and groans "Four AM. Fuck."

Dustin and Lucas are already asleep on the floor, and Max is stumbling in, going to sleep next to them.

"And I'll call me and Joyce in sick tomorrow... And your parents... this is a nightmare," he mutters tiredly, but he goes back into the other room as Steve and Nancy follow Max, sitting in chairs and falling asleep themselves.

El is still away, looking up at you with droopy eyes as you look back

at her.

Your mouth is dry now.

“We have a lot to talk about,” you mumble softly, hoping no one else hears, “But... later.”

She nods, “Later.”

You kiss her forehead as she droops onto your chest again, rubbing her arm and trying to fall asleep yourself.

Trying to get yourself un-wired from... everything.

“Mike?”

You thought she was asleep.

“Yeah, El?”

“Can... you... can you call me... Jane?” she mumbles.

You look at her in shock.

“Yeah... sure. Jane.”

You like it.

“Thank you.”

So much to ask.

So many questions.

But your head hurts so much.

And your eyes kind of burn?

And you need to sleep.

You rest your head on top of hers and fall asleep, not even checking if she did too.

You wake up a long time later – it's bright enough outside to be afternoon. You groan, softly, as everything hurts a little from sleeping sitting up. Your leg still stings, but less so.

El – Jane – is still asleep on your chest. Her breath comes out small and soft, and the dark lines that were around her eyes last night have faded away. She still has blood smeared on her lip, though, and you want to wipe it away, but you don't want to wake her up either.

Your eyes widen.

Shit.

You have to pee.

“Hey, kid.”

You look up to see Hopper walking over to you, his arms folded across his chest.

“Hey...”

“I know you just woke up, but we should talk more today. All three of us.”

“Nancy, too,” you mumble.

“Nancy...?”

“She... knows.”

Hop nods, “Okay. Is there anyone else who knows?”

You look around. Your other friends are all still asleep, too.

“Um... I think... Lucas and Will and Dustin... *know*? But I haven't... told them,” you mumble quietly.

“So they figured it out?” Hop sighs. You nod again.

“Alright. That's your own issue, kid, I'll leave you to that,” Hop pauses, “But we can discuss a game plan for you and El going forward. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Jane,” you mutter.

“What?”

“She wants to be called Jane now.”

“Oh. Okay. She hasn’t told me yet.”

You nod.

“Makes sense...” Hop mutters, almost like he doesn’t want you to hear.

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why Jane?”

He swallows.

“That’s... that’s her real name.”

“Wait – *what?*”

“Like I said, a lot to talk about...”

“I think we should all talk, Jim.”

You look up to see Mrs. Byers walking over, frowning. She looks dead tired too, bags under her eyes and her mouth drawn into a thin line.

“All... talk?” Hopper grimaces.

“I think keeping secrets from each other is a bad way to go. We need to be honest about what’s happening,” Mrs. Byers says, firmly.

“But...”

Your heart is pounding so loudly in your chest you feel sick to your stomach. Everyone... knowing? *Everyone?*

“I can’t,” you croak out, your heart still going fast, tears welling up in

your eyes.

“Kid, you said it yourself, your friends basically already know,” Hopper sighs, “I think Joyce is right...”

“NO!” you shout, your stomach churning. Everyone else starts to stir at that, including El – Jane.

Fuck.

Shit fuck.

You stupid fucker.

You stupid idiot fucking shitlord.

Your fingers itch to hurt yourself –

A hand goes on them. You look down in shock to see E... Jane, looking up at you with tears in her eyes. She holds to your fingers so tightly you know she knows. She knows what you want to do.

You take a deep, painful breath.

“Mike.”

You look to see Mrs. Byers kneeling before you, holding onto your knees and giving you a smile, though tears are in her eyes too.

“I know it’s hard, and it’s scary, to admit you’ve been... going through something... to so many people.”

You swallow heavily. Jane is still squeezing your fingers.

“But I think that everyone here... apart from that Billy kid...”

You snort despite yourself.

“Is your family now, right? And we all can trust each other. I promise. I promise that no one is going to be mad at you, Mike,” Mrs. Byers murmurs.

You look at her, crying fully now, and you have a feeling based on

how Jane's body shaking against you that she is too.

"How much did Will tell you?" you whisper.

"Just what he guessed," Mrs. Byers murmurs.

"All... alright."

You look down at Jane, who's crying. Her eyes are less red, at least. You press your forehead into hers and cry, too.

"Can I talk to Jane first?" you mumble.

Hopper and Mrs. Byers look at each other, before Hopper sighs heavily.

"Yeah, alright kid. Then we'll all talk."

You nod. Jane straightens up, stretching and wiping the tears off of her eyes. She gets up from the couch, then and takes your hand, the two of you walking over to Mrs. Byers' room. No one's there, so she closes the door and sits down on Mrs. Byers' bed, looking up at you expectantly.

"Hey," you whisper.

"Hey," she mumbles back, smiling a little.

"Um... should I sit... next to you?"

Your heart leaps into your throat again at the thought.

She nods silently, so you sit next to her, keeping some space between you. You both stare out in front of you, not looking at each other or touching, just sitting in silence for a while while your thoughts spin and spin and spin and spin. You wring your wrists nervously.

"So... um... what..."

Jane looks over at you, and you look at her, and you swallow again. She's crying. Again.

"I watched you every day," she mumbles.

“Every day?” you whisper.

“Every day, when Hop took me in. So three-hundred and twenty-seven days.”

“Where were you before that?”

“The woods. I didn’t want to get you hurt, so I stayed away,” she whispers. You nod, your heart clenching more.

“And then...”

“Hop found me, and he brought me to the cabin. And he kept me hidden. And he told me not to talk to you...”

“Okay,” you swallow, and you’re crying already, and you don’t really know how to stop.

The emptiness inside you is stinging.

“But I watched. I visited. Every day.”

“Every day?”

“Every day.”

“Um... what did you...”

“When you call me,” Jane sighs, “When you... hurt... yourself...”

You’re crying more now. You hold your face in your hands.

You didn’t want her to see that.

You never wanted her to see that.

You can’t stop crying, so you shake and shake and sob and sob and you’re sobbing so loudly you know people outside the room can hear but you can’t stop yourself now.

You feel her wrap her arms around your shoulder but you still keep crying, crying, crying, crying, until you can’t cry anymore because your eyes hurt.

“S... sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry Jane. I’m s- s – sorry... sorry... sorry...”

“It’s okay, Mike, it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay –“

“No, no it’s not, no it’s –“

“It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay –“

“I hurt you –“

“I don’t mind...”

“You don’t *mind*?” you sit up, looking at her in shock through your puffy red eyes. What’s left of the makeup that was around her eyes has smeared with her crying, and her eyes are puffy and red too.

“I don’t.”

“How can you not *mind*?”

She shrugs, looking away and not saying anything. You reach out for her hands, holding them so tightly in yours you worry you hurt her again.

“Jane...”

“I don’t mind,” she repeats again, her voice even softer this time.

“Jane, why don’t you mind?”

She keeps looking down at her lap, at your hands holding hers, not saying anything.

“Jane?”

She looks up at you again with more tears streaming down her face.

“B... Because...”

You reach out for her face before you can stop yourself, holding the back of her head with your fingers in your hair with one hand, and cupping her cheek with your other. She breathes slowly, and cries

more, keeping her eyes shut and her head pointed down.

“Jane...”

You’re really starting to like the sound of that.

She looks at you again, her eyes flicking upward and opening. They’re so dark and bloodshot your breath stops in your throat, just for a second.

“B... B... Because I’m a m-m-monster...” she whispers.

Your heart cracks so sharply you can feel the pain reverberate in your chest.

“You’re... what?”

“I’m a Monster,” she repeats, sobbing so heavily she crumples and falls back on the bed. She curls in on herself, tucking her knees into her chest and wrapping her arms around them, burying her head against them.

“Jane you’re... you’re not a...”

“I am!” she shouts, “I am, I am, I am I am I am I am I am –“

“No! No, Jane, no, you’re not a Monster at all,” you reach for her, but she refuses to move, so you fall down on the bed next to her, and you reach out for her arm and hold it, lying across from her and trying to get her to look at you while she continues to sob.

“I’m a monster. I hurt people. I kill people. I get people killed. I hurt everything I hurt everyone I opened the Gate I brought in the Monsters I’m a Monster I’m a Monster I’m a Monster I’m a Monster I’m –“

“No, Jane, No, No, No, *no*,” you shout, pulling her up from her crouch roughly. She shirks back from you, tears streaking down her face as she stares at you in shock.

You swallow.

“S... sorry...”

She folds up again, but remains sitting, looking at you while resting her chin on her knees.

“I’m a Monster,” she repeats.

“No, you’re not,” you insist.

“I’m a Monster.”

“No you’re not.”

“I’m a Monster!”

“No you’re *not!*”

“I’m a Monster!!”

“No you’re *not!!*”

“I’m A MONSTER –“

“NO –“

“YES –“

“NO –“

“YES I AM!”

“NO, YOU’RE NOT –“

“I AM A MONSTER, MIKE –“

“JANE –“

“I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM –“

“JANE I LOVE YOU.”

It comes out before you can stop yourself.

Jane stops talking, her mouth falling open, breath coming out of her in a *woosh* that you can actually hear.

You immediately clamp up your jaw, eyes widening as large as they'll go –

Oh shit Oh shit Oh Shit Oh Shit oh Shit oh Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit Shit Shit Shit Shit –

You watch each other for a long time, not saying anything, just breathing, just breathing.

Before you actually register what is happening, she reaches across, grabs your face in her hands, and pulls you roughly to her. You squeak in surprise as your lips are against hers, clumsily, fumbling, you're falling because you've been caught off guard –

You trip and fall and you falling makes her fall and you both land on the bed and Jane immediately starts laughing.

Laughing.

And it's such a beautiful sound.

"I love you, Mike," she whispers, looking at you and crying a little. You cry more, now, and you lean across the bed to kiss her again, this time less fumbling, less clumsy, more soft, more light –

She makes a sound and your heart flutters –

You pull away and let out a long breath, looking at her and swallowing heavily. She smiles at you, crying still, though.

"Why am I not a Monster?" she whispers.

"Because you're good. And you're kind. And you're brave. And you're smart, and you're –"

"Mike."

You stop, swallowing.

“Mike, I’m not any of that,” she mumbles.

“You are. You’re good because... because... because you want to help us all. You didn’t have to want to do that,” you explain, and now your thoughts are going as fast as your words as you think of things –

“And you’re kind, because of how you look after me, and Dustin, and Lucas, and Will... And you’re smart, because you know nothing about the world because of that awful Lab but you’re still figure it out... and you’re funny, the way you make me laugh all the time and how much you love Eggos and you act so silly even though you hurt so much and you’re brave because you face all these monsters to save me, to save us, to save us all, so brave... I wish I was as brave as you...” you ramble.

She’s crying again.

“You’re brave too.”

“No I’m not.”

“But –“

“I hurt myself. Because I’m...” you swallow.

“Because... you’re...”

“Because I’m scared. Because of how much I hurt,” you let in a shaking breath, your chest on the verge of sobs, “How... empty... I... feel...”

Jane reaches out for you and holds your shoulder, crying too.

“Mike...”

“I feel so empty. So empty. So alone. So... I either feel... nothing... numb... or too much... too angry... at everything... too lost... with everything...”

It hurts to say it out loud, to her, in person.

Even though she’s probably heard you say it before, in the Void.

“And I hurt myself to feel... something... either anything at all... or... to not feel... the... bad... feelings...”

She’s crying so hard, and so are you, and you reach to hug her and you rest your head in her shoulder and just cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry.

“I hurt you,” you mumble after a while.

She doesn’t say anything, just watches you as you pull away from the hug and wipe away the tears and look at her.

“I hurt you, and I’m sorry. You hurt me, and you’re sorry. Am I a monster?” you ask softly.

She shakes her head rapidly.

“Then... neither are you.”

She still looks like she doesn’t believe you.

But she doesn’t say anything.

“How... how much did you see?” you ask after a long while. She looks away, and shrugs.

“Jane...”

“A... a lot.”

You swallow, “Um... did you see...”

“Probably.”

You nod.

“I’m. I’m sorry.”

She sighs.

“I’m sorry too.”

“Please don’t call yourself –“

"I'm sorry I didn't tell Hopper."

"Oh..."

"He could have helped."

"I dunno..."

"Are you still going to do it?"

You frown.

"I... I don't know..."

She nods, "Okay."

You sit there like that for a while, just in silence.

"I'm... I'm so happy... you're here..."

She looks at you as you try to find your words.

"But... this is... this has always been..."

"Yeah, I know."

"You... what do you know?"

"It's about everything. Not just me."

You nod again, and let out a sigh.

"Um... um..."

"Yeah?"

"Just... you know... tell me? If you do?" Jane asks. You nod.

"I can. I can do that."

She smiles a little and looks at her lap again, sighing.

"I hurt myself too."

Your heart breaks so fast you feel whiplash.

“You cut –“

“No! No. It hurts too much,” Jane shakes her head very fast, “No... um... I drank... a lot.”

“Drank... what?”

“Beer. Wine. Vodka,” she whispers to her hands.

Your heart shatters again. You start to cry, again.

“It made... my pain... go away? And I could... visit you... easier,” Jane explains haltingly, swallowing and wiping away her tears.

“Oh Jane...” you cry, reaching for her and holding her, “Do you still...”

“When I can. Hop made me stop.”

“Good for him.”

She snorts, wiping away her tears, “But if I don’t get to do that, why do you get to hurt yourself?”

You swallow.

It’s like Nancy all over again.

“Okay. I’ll try to stop. And you’ll stop too. Okay?”

She looks at you, “Really? You’ll stop?”

“I... um...” you grimace, “I’ll *try*. It’s... gonna be hard...”

She nods, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

And you lean over and hug her again, squeezing her as tightly as you

can. And she squeezes back, and for a long moment, you feel like you can tackle this.

Together.

END PART ONE

Notes for the Chapter:

Why, yes, I'm updating so soon after last night. This is how excited I am to write my own stuff again. The chapters are supposed to be this short, the last four were only so long because Gd-dammit I wanted to get past the transcription HELL.

I have no idea how long this story is going to be, honestly. I had expected it to be just a drabble of sorts? I mean, drabble for me means "less than 50k" but that's still my version of a drabble, and now... well... now it's definitely not going to be one.

So I dunno. We'll see. This is an adventure we're all taking together. My friend Bluebeholder (Wanderingnork) is writing a Fantastic Beasts fanfic that she calls the "accidental epic" and I'm pretty sure this falls into a similar category (though hopefully not as long... please... I already have a 1mil word long HP fanfic I'm not done with yet...)

Please comment! Thank you all for doing so so far, and I hope you like where I'm taking the characters :)

10. Punk and Boops

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Mentions of Self-Harm and Underage Drinking

PART TWO

NOVEMBER 6 1984

JANE HOPPER

“Rise and shine, cupcake.”

You groan, rolling over in your bed.

Everything hurts.

Everything *has* hurt for days.

Was it the vodka?

Was it not drinking water for approximately thirty-six hours?

Was it not getting enough sleep, and sleeping in weird positions?

Was it all the powers-using, from moving the train, to choking the bad man, to closing the gate?

Was it all the crying with Mike yesterday?

Probably all of these things.

“No,” you mutter.

“Come on, Jane, I know it’s hard but we should start cleaning up the cabin. It’s a mess...”

You grumble more, holding your pillow over your head.

Everything *hurts*.

“I can clean it without you, but I’d much rather have your company!”

You pull the pillow off and glare at Hop over it.

“Do I have to help?” you mutter.

“Not at all, it’s not your fault it was the site of an exorcism,” Hopper shrugs.

“Ex... or... what?” you say, sitting up more fully and looking at him. Hopper groans.

“Right, okay... um... basically it’s a word for... uh... getting a bad magical thing out of someone else.”

“You can do that?” you whisper.

Could you be not a Monster?

“Er... depends on the thing. Will had the shadow monster in him, so they got it out,” Hopper says softly. You look at him, tears in your eyes.

“Can the Monster be taken out of... me?” you whisper.

Hopper kneels before you and takes your hands in his, looking at you seriously. You swallow, and your tears spill over.

“Jane.”

You keep crying, your body now moving roughly, and your head hurts so much that each tear hurts too.

“Jane, take a deep breath.”

You breathe in, sharply, it coming in in little bits – *huh huh huh huh* –

“Jane, you’re not a monster.”

“STOP SAYING THAT!” you scream. Hopper looks at you in shock.

“EVERYONE SAYS THAT BUT I AM, I AM, I AM –“

“Jane –“

“I AM! I AM! I AM!”

You scream so loudly the TV glass shatters.

You are

You are

You are

You are

You aren't really aware of it until it's over, but when you come back to your senses, you realize that Hopper is holding you and cradling you, shushing you softly as he rocks you back and forth.

You breathe easier.

“Okay, Jane, listen,” he murmurs softly after you stop screaming for a while.

“Listen, okay?”

You nod, wiping off the tears from your eyes and sniffing.

“I know I can't convince of this right now.”

You sniffle more.

“But. I am going to keep trying, okay?”

You turn to face him sharply, glaring.

“Because you're not. And I don't care if you don't believe me. One day you will,” Hopper says softly.

You sigh and stare down at your hands.

“Now, come on. Not good for you to stay in bed all day,” Hopper declares. You nod, and he helps you get up.

“Go take a shower. When you’re done, I’ll put on some music!”

You snort.

“I found some stuff this morning I think you’ll really like.”

“You... left?”

Yesterday, everyone had sat around, talked about what had been going on, and made a plan for going forward. Part of that plan was that Hopper would live at the cabin with you, permanently, until the whole situation with your freedom was resolved. No more nights spent alone in the woods.

The process of moving was “a bitch”, according to Hop, but he didn’t mind.

“You were out like a light, kid. Wanted to get you a present.”

You nod, following him into the living room. He shakes his finger at you.

“Nope – it’s a surprise. Go shower.”

You stick your tongue out at him, but you comply, feeling much better when the warm water has washed over you. Unfortunately, you don’t have any clean clothes in your new... style? So you go back to wearing Hopper’s overlarge flannel.

“Alright kid, I asked a guy at the record store about this and he recommend me this,” Hopper continues, holding up a large record – there were men on it in black and white, and THE CLASH written in pink letters.

“Not really my thing, but I want to... encourage... your... personal... growth?” Hopper frowns, “I think that’s what I should say, right?”

You give him a look.

“Right, anyway, I’m going to put this on, and you’re going to watch me clean and cheer me up, and then we’re going to have an Eggo Dinner Extravaganza.”

You perk up at that.

“And then after that we can do whatever you want.”

“I want to see Mike again.”

Hopper sighs.

“I know, kid, and I wish you could, but we should still be careful. Dr. Owens says he’s on it, but with all the chaos at the lab... it’s not his only problem. You know what we agreed yesterday. You guys can visit now, but not every day, and we have to be careful.”

You nod, sighing too.

“And he needs to... readjust to school. And deal with his parents. It’s not a good day today, you know?”

You nod again.

“I promise. It’s *actually* going to be different now. Even if Dr. Owens falls through. And I’m not going to back on that.”

You swallow, but nod a third time.

Hopper turns and puts on the music, and loud, grating music starts playing. It goes at a fast beat, and as Hopper sweeps up glass and dust and ash, you start to tap your feet to it.

It sounds like what Kali and her gang played in the car, but different.

You like it a lot.

Some of the songs were more slow than you liked, but then a faster one would play again, and you couldn’t help it – you’d start dancing, and Hopper would laugh, and say you are distracting him, but you don’t care.

You especially like one that you look on the album for – “White Riot”.

You try to headbang like Kali’s gang, but you don’t have enough hair

for that, so you just keep dancing around.

“Kid! How am I supposed to put new glass in the windows if you’re going to keep dancing?” Hopper snorts.

You don’t care, you just keep dancing.

“I FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON!” You shout, looking at Hopper and grinning.

“Are you *aware* that I am the law –“

“I FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON!”

“Jane –“

“I FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON!”

“I suppose I deserve this –“

“I FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON!”

Eventually Hopper just gives up, watching you bounce around the room happily and shaking his head.

“So, more albums like this. Got it.”

“Really?” you gasp, stopping your bouncing just to look at Hopper in shock.

“I mean, I have no idea what I’m doing, so I’m going to talk to Jonathan about it...”

“Really?” you say a little louder, now jumping.

“Oh my God, yes, kid –“

You smile again, and just go back to dancing around the room, and Hopper goes back to cleaning, and you listen to the album more times than Hopper probably is happy with, but he never complains.

After cleaning, dinner, music, and a game of checkers, you approach Hopper as he reads a book next to the broken TV.

“What’s up, kid?”

You bounce a little on your feet.

“Can I... call... Mike?”

“With a Walkie?”

“No... I just want to talk to him in my head. Let him know I’m there.”

He looks up at you, and nods.

“Go for it.”

You smile at him, and then run back into your room, putting on the blindfold. Your powers are... not great at the moment, but you manage to focus with the radio static.

Mike is sitting in his room.

He’s staring ahead of him, crying, occasionally holding his face in his hands.

“You can do this you can do this you can do this you can –“

You immediately run up to him and sit next to him, reaching and touching his shoulder.

“*Mike.*”

He jumps.

“E – Jane?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” you say.

“Uh... hi,” he says awkwardly, looking over to where you are but not seeing you. You smile anyway.

“Hi. How are you?”

“Um... okay.”

“Mike.”

He grimaces.

“Friends don’t lie.”

“Okay, okay... uh... Today was rough.”

“What happened?”

“Parents were super mad at me and Nancy for being gone so long and not telling them anything and missing school. And, like, school was rough because everyone had heard that Will freaked out, or something, so everyone was making fun of us for being friends with a crazy person. And that got to me, because, well, I’m crazy too, and so I’m just... all... I’m all wound up. And I’ve been trying to do homework but I can’t focus on it. And I’m so behind! It’s not good. And I miss you. And I know I can see you again soon, and I know you’re OK, and that it’s going to be okay, but I still can’t help but feel like...”

“Like nothing’s changed?” you whisper.

“Exactly,” Mike nods, “Exactly. So thank you... for talking to me...”

“Of course, Mike.”

There’s a long silence.

“I haven’t hurt myself today,” he mumbles.

“Good,” you whisper back.

“I wanted to, though.”

“I know.”

“I’ve been trying to tell myself not to for the past hour...”

“How can I help?”

“Talk to me?”

“I am talking to you.”

“I mean... about your day, about how you feel, anything. Just talk.”

“Okay... I don’t like to talk.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

You sigh.

“I can try...”

“I just don’t want to be thinking... as much... anymore. My thoughts are...”

“Tightening?”

“Exactly. I can’t escape.”

“Okay. Um. Today I watched Hopper clean the cabin.”

“That must have been boring.”

“Not really, he got me music!”

“Music?”

“The Clash.”

“Oh – Will likes that band.”

“Maybe Will can show me more!”

“Yeah, I think he’d like that,” Mike laughs.

“It was nice. I jumped around the room.”

“That sounds crazy.”

“It was fun!”

“Did I say it didn’t sound like it?”

Mike and you laugh together, though you don't really know why, exactly. You're just happy to be talking to him, rather than watch him be sad.

"And then we had a lot of Eggos –"

"Of course."

"And we played checkers."

"Who won?"

"I did!"

"Good for you!"

"And then I visited you."

"I'm glad you did."

He reaches for where you are, his hand going right through you, but it makes you smile anyway.

"Sorry. That was stupid."

"Nah."

He laughs.

"You're a little ridiculous."

"Ri... diculous?"

"Silly."

"Oh, yes. Yes I am."

"I love that."

You blush immediately.

"You are too."

“Oh, definitely.”

“I love that, too.”

He blushes now.

“Tha... thanks.”

You smile, and you both sit in silence like that for a little while longer.

“Jane? Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Were you... ever going to tell me you were gone? If you had stayed with Kali.”

You frown.

“I don’t know.”

“Why... not?”

“Um...”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“I mean, I missed you, a lot, Mike. I missed you *so much*. That’s why I visited, and saw you were in trouble – I was missing you.”

“That’s good, you saved my life...”

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

“But... I went to her... in the first place... because... of my mom...”

“Yeah...”

“And...”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, no... I was... jealous.”

“Jealous?” Mike looks so shocked you want to laugh, “Of... of what?”

“I saw you and Max together.”

“You – *what?*”

“In the Gym. She was on her skateboard. I made it move.”

“I knew it!”

You’re startled and jump back, but he looks triumphant.

“I *knew* you were there! I just knew it!”

“Mike...”

“Sorry – um – you have nothing to be jealous over.”

“I thought I was being replaced.”

“Okay first of all, no one could ever replace you. You’re *Jane*. And that has nothing to do with your powers by the way, it’s all about how good and kind you are. Second of all, no one could replace you, because magic powers.”

You laugh.

“Third of all, the group can have more than one girl.”

You laugh again.

“Fourth of all, I didn’t want her in the party, either. I felt the same way. I thought Lucas and Dustin were trying to replace you. So when you saw us I was actually trying to get her to not join us all.”

“Oh,” you mutter.

“Fifth of all, I don’t like her like that at *all*. Dustin and Lucas are fighting over her.”

You laugh once more.

You'd like to see that.

"Sixth of all, even if I did... like someone else, like that. That wouldn't change the fact that I like you like that... the *best*. The *most*. And I want to kiss *only* you and... stuff."

"Oh," you whisper.

"Sorry... um... Shit," he mutters.

"Shit?"

"I wanted to talk to you about this when I came over next..."

"Talk about what?"

"Do you know what... girlfriends... are?"

"Friends that are girls?"

"No, I mean someone's *girl-friend*."

"People say that on TV. It's always confused me."

"Of course it has... um... well when you decide that there's a person who... you... want... um... this is hard," Mike groans.

"It's okay, Mike."

"Thanks," he pauses, "Basically... from what I understand... you can like a lot of people like that. Like you wouldn't mind kissing them and stuff. But a girlfriend is someone you say to them, I want to *only* kiss you. And I want you to *only* kiss me. And we'll help each other whenever we need it. And we'll be the best of friends. And we'll go out and watch movies just us. And stuff. Basically your best best friend, but with kissing and stuff..."

"Aren't we already that?"

"I... yes, I guess we are," he blushes, "I mean... like... officially. Like we've said it. I guess? And we both know we are. For sure. And like, I

introduce you to people as my girlfriend. And you introduce me to people as your boyfriend.”

You smile, even though you’re still confused.

“Okay. Sure,” you say.

He grins at you, “That’s great – that’s – that’s great!”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“So are you.”

And you both laugh together for a while.

“I should work on my homework,” he says, “Um... you should probably go. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

You admit your head hurts a little more than you want it to.

“Okay. Um...”

“I love you, Jane.”

You smile again.

“I love you, Mike.”

“Talk to you soon?”

“Really soon,” you promise, “Bye...”

“Bye,” he says, and you take off the blindfold and leave the void.

You go out into the living room again, where Hopper is still reading.

“How’s he doing?”

“Better,” you murmur.

“Good...” he looks at you, frowning.

“What?”

“Um. I want to talk to you about two things, if that’s alright.”

You nod.

“Okay.”

“Great... first... um... yesterday Mike shouted at you that he loves you...”

“Yes,” you blush immediately.

“Alright. Uh... do you... love him too?”

“Hopper!” you shriek, so embarrassed you feel every part of your face go red.

“This isn’t an attack, kid, I genuinely want to know –“

“Um... yes.”

“Alright... have you since last year or...”

“I only knew when I visited Kali.”

“Oh.”

“And I told him yesterday.”

Hopper looks at you for a long time.

“For the first time?”

You nod again.

He has tears in his eyes and you don’t really know why, but you don’t ask either.

“Ok...okay. Okay. So uh... my second question was... why Jane?”

You tilt your head in confusion.

“I mean, why do you want us to call you Jane now instead of El? I just want to know why you picked one over the other...”

You frown.

“Um...”

“You know you can tell me, kid.”

“You’ll yell at me again.”

Hop looks upset.

“I won’t yell... is that what you think I do?”

You shrug.

He sighs.

“I promise not to yell, kid. I promise.”

You mumble the answer, and he doesn’t hear.

“Alright, you don’t have to tell me...”

“It’s the name person-me has,” you say again.

“It’s... what?”

“Mama gave me that name. When I was a person. Eleven is the name Papa gave me. When I was a Monster.”

“Oh... okay. That’s kind of what I thought.”

“And El is nice, because Mike gave it to me, but I was still... it’s still from... it’s still from Eleven. My monster name.”

“Okay kid. I get it, I promise.”

“I’m sorry –“

“What are you sorry for?”

“Not wanting to be El.”

“You get to be whatever you want to be, kid. That’s called being a

person.”

He smiles at you.

And you smile back, before bursting into tears.

“Hopper?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Are you going to take care of me... forever?”

“Until you can take care of yourself, yeah. I promise. As long as you want me to.”

You swallow and sit down, looking at your feet.

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re family, kid.”

“Are you my... my...”

“Your what?”

You shake your head.

“I don’t want to call you Papa.”

“Yeah, well I don’t want you to call me that either.”

You nod.

“There are other words for it. Or you can call me Hop,” Hopper explains, “Still. Like you have been.”

You frown.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, take your time. This is the definition of something you should decide only when you know what you want.”

You nod again, and you sit next to him and read books together for the rest of the evening.

N O V E M B E R 1 0 1 9 8 4

Dr. Owens seemed different than the other men from the Lab.

First of all, he smiled at you, which very few people from there ever did.

Second of all, he didn't talk to you in *that* voice.

The voice that made you feel small and yet evil at the same time.

He talked to you like other people talked to you. Like you were normal.

Third of all, he laughed a *lot*.

Fourth of all, the first thing he ever said to you was, "I'm sorry that Dr. Brenner was in charge of your wellbeing. I never liked that man."

"I don't like him either," you said.

And now he and Hop have been chatting for a while, while you sit next to them at the kitchen table, watching quietly.

"Well so far no one has talked about Eleven –"

"Jane," Hopper corrects.

"Right, forgive me. Jane, at the Lab. It's mostly about clean up, and dealing with the damn Bauman disaster that's going to leak any day now –"

"Sorry Doc, but y'all have it coming."

"I'm just saying we have enough on our plate as it is. Anyway. I'm working on discussing terms with the guys upstairs," Dr. Owens continues, "I've said I know where you are, but I didn't clarify that term at all."

Dr. Owens uses a lot of words you don't really understand well.

“How’d they take it?” Hopper asks seriously.

“They demanded I turn Jane over right away but I refused. I’m putting up a moral defense. There’s this group of people going from city to city, killing all our retirees –“

Your eyes grow wide but you look away before Dr. Owens can see.

“And we, frankly, want to prevent another disaster like that. Seems like one of the test subjects is leading the charge. It’s a mess and wasting most of our resources to clean up the situation and hunt them. So they don’t want to... well, with Dr. Brenner out of the way, they don’t want to trigger another test subject –“

“Child,” Hopper interjects.

“Right, sorry. Trigger another child into looking for revenge. So I’m reminding them that Jane is the strongest of all of them, and the last thing we need is for her to go on a murder spree against us.”

You smile a little.

“And, frankly, a psychic willing to work *with* us in the future is better than one who wants to burn us all down. Not saying you have to, Jane,” Dr. Owens says quickly, “You can do whatever you want. But this is how I’m trying to persuade the big guys, see.”

“Is it working?” Hopper asks.

“Yes and no. There are quite a few who agree with me, and others still who are just sick of wasting resources on chasing Jane. But she is... an investment. A major investment by the organization. And there is always going to be a large push-back against giving up a major investment. So about half aren’t on board yet.”

“So what do we do?” Hopper sighs.

“For now, since we’re evenly split, discussion and coming to a group – wide conclusion takes precedence over catching Jane. The head of the organization favors freeing her, too, which helps. Which is why I felt comfortable having this discussion here, even though someone may have tracked me.”

“Okay...” Hopper frowns.

“If this changes and you need to find a new hiding spot, I’ll let you know. But honestly, this isn’t exactly a bad idea anyway. There’s a large monkey wrench in the problem,” Dr. Owens sighs.

“Oh no,” Hopper groans.

“See, our organization is... secret. Technically, it doesn’t exist. The head can send word along to the Department of Energy proper, which can then ask for orders from other government agencies, but officially we don’t exist, and all our orders relinquish responsibility.”

“So...”

“So, even if we decide to free Jane, the FBI agents looking for her will continue to look for her.”

Hopper lets out a loud groan.

“But, in the event of *that*, I have a plan,” Dr. Owens says immediately.

“You don’t say,” Hopper grunts.

“We will give Jane a new birth certificate, and a back story. Say she’s your relative – niece, maybe?”

“I don’t have any siblings.”

“Right, well, that detail can be fixed later. And we’ll give her a whole backstory for who she is. When we’ve done that, and waited for the FBI to cool off – because they’re wasting resources searching for her, too, really – then she can live a completely normal life.”

“Well, here’s to all this being quick.”

“Yes.”

They talk for a little while longer, but all you can think of is *normal life*.

It could happen.

It's *possible*.

You can't wait to tell Mike.

You can't wait to tell Mike *so much* that you immediately look over at Hopper with excitement the moment Dr. Owens is gone.

"Let's just... hold off," Hopper sighs.

"Why?" you demand, angrily.

"Kid, you heard him," Hopper shakes his head, "I understand that you want to tell Mike, but Dr. Owens listed about a million ways this could all go wrong. So I don't think we should tell Mike that this could happen until the birth certificate is in my hand."

You frown.

"If you think I don't want to tell him, that's wrong," Hopper murmurs softly, "And we should tell him that everything's still up in the air, because it *is*. I want to give him good news, but I just don't want to take that good news away if everything goes to shit. That would be stupid."

You nod.

"Okay. You should invite him over tomorrow because it's been a while, but I'm serious, *don't tell him*. You know how upset he'd be if everything went wrong."

You nod again.

"What about how upset... I'll be?" you whisper after a minute.

Hopper sighs heavily.

"I know. I didn't want you to know, either."

"It's better that I know," you shout, glaring, "I don't want secrets!"

"Okay, okay. Then we deal with that. Together," Hopper promises.

“Together?” you mumble.

“Together.”

N O V E M B E R 11 1984

“Alright kids, you two be good. I need to go and make sure that stupid punk who keeps trashing the high school doesn’t come back today for Veteran’s day,” Hopper says while you and Mike play checkers together.

“When will you be back?” Mike asks, frowning.

“Why do you wanna know, kid? I’ll be back when I’m back.”

“Uh... I... um...” Mike blushes. Hopper raises his eyebrows at him.

“In case someone followed Mike and we need help,” you say, looking at him and raising your eyebrows back in return.

Hopper frowns at you, but nods.

“Alright, kids. Radio me if you need help, and I’ll be sure to let you know when I’m on my way back. Be good.”

“Yes Chief,” Mike says nervously, eyes widening, “Absolutely.”

Hopper snorts, grabs his hat, and leaves. You lock the cabin door behind him.

“Uh...” Mike looks... embarrassed?

Why is he embarrassed?

“You’re winning at checkers,” you say with a frown.

“What? Oh, yeah, I am,” Mike pauses, “Sorry, we can play again –“

“I was wondering why you were embarrassed.”

“Oh! Um. I’m not embarrassed,” Mike says quickly.

“Why are you embarrassed?”

"I'm not!"

"You are!"

"I'm not!"

"You are!"

"Fine! Fine I'm embarrassed," Mike shouts, looking as red as a tomato.

"Why?"

"Because we're alone together, that's why."

You frown more.

"We've been alone together before. Lots of times."

Mike sighs, "Yeah. You're right. I'm being stupid."

"Why are you being stupid?"

"Just... we have the whole cabin to ourselves? I guess?" Mike offers, looking at you seriously.

"We've... had your whole house to ourselves before, Mike," you mutter.

"You're right. I'm stupid. D'you wanna read a book?" Mike offers, "You said on Monday that you are struggling the most with reading and I wanna help!"

"Yeah," you smile at him, and you both sit down. He pulls out a book from his backpack and starts reading with you, reading out loud while you ask about words. He is reading "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" for school, and there are a *lot* of words you don't know.

"What does forsooth mean?" you ask softly.

"Let's look it up together!" Mike says cheerfully.

And that's how most of the words go, you questioning what it means, Mike offering to look it up with you, and then you go back to the book together.

But you're so frustrated at how slow it goes.

"Argh!" you shout, as it takes you another ten minutes to get through just one paragraph.

"Jane, it's okay, you know you started late, you shouldn't –"

"I get *math* and *science* just fine!" you shout, tears in your eyes, "I love math! It's easy! I do it so fast!"

"That's great –"

"And science is interesting! And has pictures. Those help!"

"I'm so glad –"

"But why are words so hard?"

"I don't know, Jane."

"So hard! I just can't get words!"

"You will get them. I promise."

"I don't know..."

"Why wouldn't you?" Mike asks softly. You start crying, holding your face in your hands, as he rubs your back and doesn't say anything, just makes soft, soothing sounds while you cry.

"All the letters just... get mixed up for me," you mumble after a while.

"That sounds hard," Mike admits.

"Yeah," you whisper.

"I can ask my mom if she knows anything about that..."

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell your mom about me.”

“Yeah,” Mike sighs, “I could ask Mrs. Byers?”

“I should talk to Hopper first, maybe,” you admit.

“You haven’t told him yet?” Mike asks, shocked.

“Never came up.”

“Well you definitely should tell him,” Mike pauses, reaching out and poking you on the tip of my nose and going “boop”.

“Boop?” you ask, frowning.

“Boop,” he responds, seriously.

You reach out and poke him on the tip of his nose, murmuring, “Boop.”

He grins.

“I think you just initiated a boop war.”

“A boop war?”

“A boop war,” Mike repeats, and then he reaches out and pokes you on the tip of the nose again, “Boop!”

You giggle and reach out to him, “Boop!” and, before he can try to boop you again, you boop him yourself.

“Oh, it’s on,” Mike laughs, and you both keep poking each other, first just on the nose, but then on the cheeks, shoulders, and stomachs, until you’re breathless from laughing so hard.

“Stop! Stop! It tickles!” you giggle as Mike keeps “boop”-ing you in the stomach. He immediately stops, grinning at you as you grin back at him.

“You’re ridiculous,” you say, and Mike laughs.

“You are too.”

“I love you,” you mumble. He leans over and kisses you on the forehead.

“I love you too,” he whispers against your forehead. You lean forward to rest your head on his chest, breathing slowly and closing your eyes.

“I wish I could see you every day,” you murmur.

“Well, you talk to me every day. And look!”

Mike rolls down his sleeves.

No new scars.

“Haven’t hurt myself all week!”

You smile at him, “Yay!” and lean in to kiss him on the tip of his nose.

He blushes as you pull away, looking at you with a smile.

“The ultimate boop, I guess.”

You giggle.

“Yes, the ultimate boop.”

He leans in and kisses you on the tip of the nose, murmuring boop as he pulls away.

You don’t really know what to say as you look at each other; you just smile, because that’s all you really want to do when you look at Mike.

Smile.

“Let’s read some more!” Mike declares, and you settle back against him, looking over his shoulder and reading, or at least, attempting to, as he rubs your arm with his thumb and reads out loud in a soft, soothing voice.

You wish you could stay like this forever.

But, for now, sitting here with him will do.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yes, this was an extra-fluffy chapter.

Yes, this was on purpose.

Yes, I'm doing this to make up for my plans for going forward

No, this isn't the end of their mental illness. Anyone who's been through it (such as myself) can testify that often though a good event can make you have a brief reprieve from the worst symptoms, it never lasts forever.

So right now they're riding the high of being able to see each other again.

Don't worry, every chapter won't be Mileven fluff / Jane & Hopper Family Bonding. I definitely want to include the other characters more. I just wanted to, ya know, go over Jane's readjustment to normal life first. Complete with Boops and Punk Rock Dancing.

ALSO! I have a Drabble fic now for other character POV stuff. There's something mildly important in the one bit I've posted about Dustin & Steve talking and stuff, so go check it out!!! Thanks :)

Please comment to feed a poor starving grad student! Thanks :)

11. A Spook and A Scare

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Mentions of Self-Harm, Bullying, Familial Abuse, Antisemitism, the Holocaust; and descriptions of bullying & self-harm and familial abuse

NOVEMBER 16 1984

MIKE WHEELER

“So what time do you have Shabbat service Saturday morning?”

You look up at Will as he sits next to you in class, frowning at you. He still looks far too sick to be there, but he’s there, books and pale face and all.

“Uh... ten in the morning. Why?”

“Mom wants to go.”

“Your mom... wants... to go?”

Will sighs, “She’s feeling down after everything. Bob. You know?”

“Yeah, I do. We’ll see her there, then,” you agree. Will turns back to his books, writing in them as the bell rings and class begins.

You feel a bit of paper flick you in the back of the head. You groan, quietly, under your breath, but reach to grab it from between you and the chair, opening it up.

DND SAT WITH GIRLS??

You turn around to look at Dustin behind you, opening his face into a wide grin and holding his thumbs up high. You snort and nod.

Saturday is going to be interesting.

You take notes during class, but you keep finding yourself getting distracted. Thinking about Jane's problems with reading and how you're going to try to help her so she can eventually join you all in school. Thinking about how your mom and dad keep screaming at you and Nancy every day *still* and how you just want it to stop. Thinking about how Will clearly isn't better, but he's still here at school. Thinking about how Max showed up yesterday with a big bruise on her eye and wouldn't tell anyone where it had come from.

Even though you all knew.

Class goes by slowly, and you honestly wish you had something to distract you from your spiraling thoughts.

Bullies.

Screaming.

Reading.

Sickness.

Abuse.

Bullies.

Reading.

Sickness.

Screaming.

Abuse.

Sickness.

Abuse.

Bullies.

Reading –

“Care to come back to Earth, Michael?”

Your head snaps up. Ms. Burns is glaring at you, and everyone in the class is snickering in one way or another.

“Uh... sorry.”

Ms. Burns just shakes her head, glowering even more.

“Would you like to answer the *question* now?”

“What was the question?”

“What are the central themes of the chapter we read this week?”

You try to answer, but you know the one you give is just... *bad*. She chews you out before letting you go to your next class.

Such a *fantastic* day, right?

At recess you don't even look for your friends, you just start wandering the fields, kicking up rocks and dirt as you go.

“I hope you're doing alright today, Jane,” you mutter quietly, when you know you're out of earshot of everyone.

You don't feel a chill, or hear a whisper, so you know she isn't watching. She's probably doing something important, like practicing reading.

Or maybe she is just watching TV now that Hopper brought his over from his house.

Either way, she is doing something else, and it wasn't like you have a psychic link. She just can visit you when she wants. You can't make her visit you.

You wish it was possible.

You kick up some more dirt, just circling around the school, watching the time on your new watch to make sure you weren't late to class.

“Hey, loser!”

You groan, turning and facing Sam. Sam and Pat were two kids in

your year – Troy and James had graduated at the end of last year, and so new bullies rose to take their place, like the circle of life.

“What do you want, dumbass?” you snap, looking at Sam as he walks far too close to you.

“Did you like the gift I left in your locker this morning?”

“What, that ugly cartoon? I couldn’t make out what it was,” you snort.

The truth is, you knew exactly what it was. But you don’t want to give him that satisfaction.

Sam’s face turns bright purple, and he scrunches it up. It contrasts brilliantly with his red hair, making him look like some sort of Muppet. Pat looked from Sam and back to you, his mouth hanging open like he had the IQ of a frog.

“It was a fucking Holocaust Oven you –“

“Yeah, I got that, I was just hoping you’d be dumb enough to forget what you drew too,” you snap, looking at Sam furiously, “I was not acknowledging it, shithead.”

“Why not? Didn’t it make you *upset*?” Sam teases.

“No, not at all, because the drawing looked more like a weird popcorn maker,” you say sarcastically, though your heart is in your throat and you want to throw up.

“Don’t you have cousins who died thanks to Herr Hitler?”

“Would you shut the fuck up?”

“Make me, kik–“

“Shut *up*!” you scream, and you push Sam over. He falls into the mud, shouting in protest.

“You’re gonna get it, you little –“

“Watch me you dicks!” you scream, and before Sam can get up you kick him, hard, in the knee. He shouts, and Pat manages to grab you, throwing you into the dirt. You cry out in pain, falling next to where Sam used to be, and he gets up quickly, laughing at you.

“Can’t even fight. Bet you’re a fag like your friend Byers.”

You look up at them, glaring, wishing you hadn’t walked out alone today.

“Yeah, have you even kissed a girl, Wheeler?”

You glare more, and don’t answer, because you don’t want to. Your thoughts, however, start to tighten, but not about this – more about the cartoon, and them taunting you with the words and the hate. More about that.

“See, he hasn’t. Bet he’s kissed Byers though.”

“I have kissed a girl,” you blurt out before you can stop yourself, “And I haven’t kissed Byers.”

“Right, where’s your proof?” Sam snorts.

“Yeah, prove it!” Pat agrees.

“I don’t have to for you,” you snarl. You try to get up, but Pat kicks you, hard, in the hip, making you double over in pain.

“Leave me alone!”

“Nah, we’re just getting started,” Pat snorts.

“Leave me *alone!*” you scream, and you jump up and swing your arms around roughly. You manage to clock Pat in the head and he goes down, knocking Sam down with him. You then take off running, sprinting across the field until you get back to the school.

You just want to go home.

NOVEMBER 17 1984

"I still don't get why I couldn't just be called your zoomer," Max says as Dustin packs up the Dungeons and Dragons set, everyone sitting around the cabin and eating pizza together that Hop had brought back from town.

"Because that's not an actual class, Max!" Dustin whines.

"So? This game is all about making up stuff! Why can't I make up a class?"

"Because – that's – that's not how it works!"

"I think it should be how it works," Will smiles.

"Well Will you aren't the maker of Dungeons and Dragons, are you –"

"Thank you, Will, for being much more gracious than your friends!"

Jane is just smiling next to you, leaning her head on your arm. She hasn't spoken much, but she hasn't stopped smiling either, so you count that as a victory.

"We should play a different game," you offer, "After we're done with the pizza –"

"Like what? All I brought was this," Dustin frowns.

"Well Jane has lots of games here! Plus we could just make something up."

"I like that idea," Lucas rolls his eyes, "Better than having you and Max bicker over the game mechanics –"

"I'm just saying that if she had actually accepted her role in the party then the game would have been much more fun!"

"It was plenty fun already man," Lucas sighs.

"I agree," Jane murmurs softly. Max looks over at her and smiles awkwardly, and Jane smiles back, making Max perk up.

You're glad you both talked about Jane's jealousy the other day.

"We could tell spooky stories and turn out the cabin lights!" Max offers, "It's dark outside and everything!"

"No way," you snort.

"Why not?"

"Because we've had enough spooky things for our whole lives?" you say.

"You can never have enough spooky things –"

"I think I'm good," Will agrees with you, frowning.

"What would be the stories?" Jane asks softly.

"Stuff we make up! I bet you'd be really good at it," Max says.

"Oh come on," you groan.

"We should try it – turn on the fireplace real low, don't have any other lights..." Lucas grins.

"If you kids traumatize yourselves more than you already are I'm ending these playdates," Hopper calls from his room. Jane giggles into your arm, burying her face there.

"We can tell ghost stories without traumatizing ourselves!" Max protests, "Jane, are you in?"

"Yeah," Jane says, smiling, "I'd like to try."

"I don't count for the vote cause it's my idea – Dustin you're our tiebreaker. What's it going to be?" Max asks, putting her hands on her hips and facing Dustin. Dustin frowns.

"Say you should have been our Druid!"

"Oh *come on* –"

"Say it, or I'll vote no."

"Fine. I should have been the Druid."

“Thank you. I vote yes for spooky stories.”

“Yay!” Max cheers, “Alright, let’s dim the lights and all sit around!”

Max went first, telling a tale of a serial killer clown picking off kids one by one, and it was suitably chilling, but a little too unsurprising. Lucas went next, weaving a story about pirate ghosts setting traps for people who sought their treasure.

“Can I go?” Jane asks, looking around and smiling a little.

“Yeah! Go Jane!” Max agrees, and Lucas sits down. You hate for her to leave your side even for a second, but you’re so surprised she wanted to go that you don’t mind.

“Alright,” Jane begins, looking nervous, “Um... Once, you got lost in the woods.”

For a minute, you’re worried that Jane was going to tell her own story, and you didn’t want her to be framing the story of how you met in such a... dreary way, even if it was partially true.

“There was fog all around, as far as you could see. It made your spine shiver, and your fingers tingle. It wasn’t cold, exactly, but you felt cold, because of how dark it was. Every step you took made twigs crack, and they echoed all over the forest.”

Everyone was silent, hanging on to her every word.

“As you walk through the woods, you feel like you’re being watched. Your hairs stand up on the back of your neck. Your arms get goosebumps. Your heart pounds in your throat as you turn around, as fast as you can, and see... nothing. Nothing is behind you...”

You swallow heavily, watching her nervously as she continues the story.

“Except for a strange shadow, off in the distance.”

Will looks pale in the flickering fireplace light, but he also shows wide eyes, looking at Jane excitedly. So you choose not to worry about it.

“You are scared – so scared you can’t keep your hands still. But you walk up to the shadow, hiding behind trees as you go so as not to show the monster you’re approaching it.”

Jane’s dark eye makeup makes her look eerie against the flickering light, and the way her eyes darken makes your heart beat a little more quickly than you actually thought possible.

“The shadow, as you approach it, looks more and more like a man. But it’s not a man... like a man you’ve seen before. He still has all the same parts as a man. Two arms, two legs, a middle, and a head. But his legs are long – twice as long as they should be. And his arms the same. But his body and head are that of a normal person. So he is tall, and long. Much, much too long.”

Did she see... something... like this at some point?

The thought horrifies you.

“You get close enough to see more of him. He wears normal clothes, though long. His fingers are long, and his feet seem long too. But that’s not the most scary thing about him.”

Her voice has gone into a low murmur, making everyone strain to hear her.

“He doesn’t... seem... to have... *A FACE!*”

She shouts the last bit, and everyone jumps back, screaming.

“Where his face should go is white as snow, and there are no eyes or nose or ears or hair. Only a mouth, gaping wide, black as night, a circle drawn into a permanent scream.”

Your eyes are wide and you grip the wooden floorboards in fear. You’ve forgotten that it’s Jane, speaking, at this point.

“You are so frightened by the man that you run as fast as you can through the woods, not stopping to see where you are going. As you run, you see a piece of paper, taped to a tree. You walk up to it, believing yourself to be free of the man...”

You almost want to tell Jane to stop, but you're enjoying how well she's telling the story that you don't.

"The paper just says, in scratchy letters – *RUN*."

Everyone's breathing stops together.

"So, you run. Your feet move fast against the ground, and you try to make your way through the thick, soupy fog. But everything around you is dark and crowded, and you don't know where you are, or where you're going. You just run."

Her voice is quiet again.

"You weave, in and out of trees, running, not even making a sound – when you turn a corner.... And there is the man, right. In. Front. Of. You."

Lucas lets out a shriek and then hides his face in his shirt in embarrassment.

"A long arm reaches out for you. Before you can run, before you can scream, the long, skinny fingers reach out –"

You've been so focused on Jane's face that you didn't notice her hand reaching out to your shoulder.

"And grab you!"

You scream, and everyone bursts into laughter, including Jane.

"Hey!" you protest, but you're laughing too.

"Sorry Mike, I couldn't resist," Jane giggles, hopping over to sit next to you. She leans over and kisses you on the cheek, making you blush.

"Yeah man you were like, not looking away from her," Dustin snorts.

"We were all watching her reach out to you and it was really really funny," Will giggles.

“That was really good Jane! I’m impressed,” Max says.

“Thank you,” Jane blushes, “Does anyone else wanna go?”

“You kids need to *go to sleep!*” Hopper shouts from the other room.

“Wait – is this a sleepover?” Dustin says excitedly, “Chief, is this a sleepover?”

Hopper pokes his head out from behind the door, looking bemused.

“Yes, did you not think it was? You all stayed far too late for me to risk driving you back tonight.”

“Yay!” everyone cheers.

“I don’t have sleeping bags for you kids, so you’ll just have to use all the blankets and things we have – “

Everyone scrambles to grab things from the cabinets and closets, and Hopper just shakes his head in bemusement as you do so. You are so excited about this you can’t stop bouncing around, and since Jane is holding your hand, you make her bounce with you.

“Kids, please, I have to meet with some people tomorrow... try to be quiet,” Hopper groans.

“Yes Hop,” Jane says, running over and giving him a hug. Hopper hugs her back, before closing the door. Everyone gathers around in the center of the room, laying out blankets and pushing furniture to the edges to give everyone enough space.

“Thanks for letting us sit with you today at synagogue, Mike,” Will says once you’ve all settled in. You’re lying down next to Jane, underneath the same blanket, and it makes your heart beat like crazy. Jane seems completely unfazed, her face twisted into a smile as she looks over at you.

“Course, why wouldn’t we?”

“What’s a synagogue?” Jane asks softly.

“Wait, wait, Will, you’re *Jewish*?” Max asks.

“Uh... kind of,” Will admits.

“Oh man this is a fun story,” Lucas sighs.

“Shouldn’t I define terms for Jane first?” you demand, looking over at everyone angrily.

“Fine, fine,” Lucas rolls his eyes.

“Um... so a synagogue is a place where Jewish people meet to pray together and talk about the Torah and stuff,” you say softly while everyone watches you, feeling embarrassed to have all eyes on you while you try to explain something to Jane.

“Jewish people? Pray? Torah?” Jane asks.

“Uh... it’s all about religion. What people think about like... how you should live your life. What you should believe in. That kind of stuff. Only it’s different for Jewish people because we’re also a people, we have a culture and a history going back thousands and thousands of years... and we’re like one big family, you know?”

“So you and Will are... family?”

“Distantly, I guess.”

“Okay...”

“It’s really ahrd to explain all this stuff just, randomly,” you admit, “I can try later if you want though.”

She nods, and you turn back to Lucas and Will.

“Basically... my mom was raised Jewish,” Will pauses, “But my dad made her give it up and become Christian for him and stuff.”

“Christian?” Jane asks.

“Another religion, but it works differently,” you murmur.

Jane looks more confused than ever, so you lean across and kiss her

on the forehead to make up for it.

“So you were raised Christian?” Max asks, ignoring that exchange.

“Yeah,” Will nods, “But ever since they got divorced Mom has considered going back and stuff. And now that Bob died...”

“Makes sense,” Max nods.

“So I dunno if we’re all going to become Jewish now but it’s possible. Mike is Jewish though so we’re trying out doing stuff with him,” Will finishes.

“Your dad’s a bit of an asshole, isn’t he?” Max asks.

Dustin snorts. Will glares at him.

“He is, dude, no matter how much you defend him. He made fun of the Rainbow Ship!” Dustin shouts.

“Rainbow... Ship?”

“I drew this ship,” Will mutters, “It’s stupid.”

“It was *not* stupid!” you say, “It was this big spaceship that he designed himself and it had rainbow coloring all over and stuff.”

“His dad... called him names cause of the ship,” Lucas sighs.

“That’s gross,” Max frowns, reaching over and patting Will on the arm, “I’m sorry Will.”

“Thanks,” he smiles slightly at her. Everyone starts to settle in to go to sleep, and you turn back to Jane, your heart in your throat again. Yeah, you’ve slept next to her before, but this felt... different.

“Mike?” Jane murmurs.

“Uh... yeah?”

“What’s wrong?”

You shake your head in the dark.

“Mike...”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Friends. Don’t. Lie.”

You stick your tongue out at her, and she smiles.

“Nothing’s wrong, I’m serious. I’m just nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?”

Jane is naïve. It’s cute, but you also don’t know what to say to her when these things come up. How much does she know? How much *doesn’t* she know? You don’t want to be the one to tell her. That’s... the worst possible idea. Ever. In the history of very bad ideas.

“What if I fart while we sleep?”

Jane bursts out laughing and everyone shouts sleepily. You boop her silently on the nose, and she boops you back, before scooting over closer to you. Before you really know what’s happening, she’s rested her head on your chest, and you smile as you wrap your arm around her and fall into a long, deep sleep.

N O V E M B E R 2 2 1 9 8 4

You’ve never liked Thanksgiving.

It’s always a bunch of food you’re not a huge fan of, fights between the two sides of your family, everyone ignoring you, and getting bored while people watch football.

But this Thanksgiving has to take the cake.

“I’m telling you, you should send him to a military school –“

“We’re not going to do that,” Mom says firmly, looking at Grandpa – your dad’s dad – angrily from across the dining room table.

This conversation had been going on for an hour.

“He’s been nothing but trouble for years. All this nonsense with the

games and the space wars –“

“Star Wars,” you mutter quietly.

“Be quiet,” Grandpa shouts, “Only speak when spoken to.”

Nancy looks at you from across the table worriedly, but you don’t meet her eyes.

“And now with the acting out and the graffiti and the fighting and the Russian! He’s a troublemaker and needs to learn about discipline.”

“Dad, we don’t have the resources –“

“I’ll pay.”

Your heart turns to ice, just for a moment.

“We want him to go to the High School and have a normal life,” Mom says firmly, “We also want him to keep going to Sunday School.”

Grandpa snorts. Zayde looks across the table at him, glaring.

“Got something you want to say, *Chris*?”

“No I do not, *David*.”

“Dad, please don’t...” Mom groans.

“This happens every Thanksgiving,” Bubbe mutters, “I keep telling you we should have it at separate houses.”

“Mom this isn’t the time –“

“It is exactly the time, so that we don’t have to go through this *again* next year,” Bubbe snaps.

“I didn’t say anything,” Grandpa says defensively.

“Yeah but you *thought it!*” Zayde shouts, starting to mutter and swear in Yiddish.

“Fucking speak English, this is America,” Grandpa snaps.

“I’ll speak whatever I want to speak at my daughter’s house –“

“Yeah, that *my son* paid for – “

“Oh please, this is ridiculous. They got married. None of us were happy about it but they did and now they have kids and they’re our family, and we’re all family.”

“Could we not have this conversation *again*...”

“Never mind that my grandchildren are heathens who don’t even believe in Jesus –“ Grandma mutters.

“Really, Catherine?” Mom shouts, “Now?”

“You know it’s important to her,” Dad mutters.

Grandma shrugs, turning back to her food.

“This has nothing to do with the main point. *I’m* simply saying that the boy probably could benefit from some discipline, that’s all,” Grandpa says, his mouth filled with stuffing.

“We’ll be sure to be more firm with him in the future,” Dad says, also chewing on food.

“I don’t need discipline,” you mutter, before you can stop yourself. Nancy groans.

“Didn’t I say speak only when spoken to?” Grandpa shouts.

“You’re not my dad, and I don’t give a fuck,” you snarl.

“Language!”

“Michael...” Mom sighs.

Bubbe watches you over her glasses, frowning as Grandpa, Grandma, and Zayde all start yelling at you in unison.

“You’re no good –“

“Do you have any respect?”

“I usually try to stay out of these but Michael you really need to watch your language.”

“Apologize to your mother!”

“See what I’m saying? Discipline –“

You don’t say anything more. You just drop your utensils, get up from the table, and walk upstairs.

“Get back here!”

“NO!” you scream, running up rapidly to your room.

“MICHAEL!”

Your dad is yelling at you now. You ignore him, going into your room and locking the door behind you. You can hear the adults all yelling and screaming downstairs, but you don’t care.

You reach into your nightstand and pull out your old rusted razor. Without thinking, you cut yourself all over your arms, not even bothering to bandage them up.

It’s the first time since you’ve seen Jane again.

Your arms sting worse than they have in a while, and you realize you went a little too deep. Blood is seeping all over.

“Shit. Shit. Sh... Shit,” you whisper to yourself, shaking from head to toe, the screaming still going on downstairs.

Your thoughts had tightened into such a spiral that you didn’t even register them anymore – you had just acted, without thinking –

You take a rag from under your bed and you wrap it around your bloody wrist. You then open up the window to your room, stuff some clothes and other things into your backpack, and then jump out the window.

You run down to your bike – you can still hear the shouting inside the house, as people insult you and talk about how awful you are while your parents put up only the slightest of defenses. You get on and ride as fast as you can through the night, not thinking about how you feel kind of faint, or how your wrist feels really really weird, or how you're still shaking, because you don't even know where your thoughts *went* just then.

You pull out your walkie when you're closer to the woods, now just feeling woozy and worried about your ability to make it.

"Chief? Come in, Chief?" you shout, swallowing forcefully.

Static meets your ear.

"Chief? Hopper! Hopper!" you scream, as you start to ride your bike through the woods, going down the now-familiar route.

Static again.

You keep riding, even though now you feel like you're actually going to pass out, your vision blurring and getting dark more often than is probably okay. But you keep peddling, and you keep calling, and you hope that Hopper will pick up.

You finally reach the cabin and throw your bike on the ground, weakly burying it under some leaves. You then climb up to the door, knocking weakly.

You hear talking inside.

You groan quietly as everything starts to spin.

The door opens, and you look up to see Hopper looking down at you in shock.

"Mike –"

Before he can finish, you collapse into his arms, passing out.

NOVEMBER 23 1984

You wake up really, *really* confused as to where you are.

You're in a bed, surrounded by blankets that aren't yours, your nostrils filled with a smell that isn't your house.

And your wrist hurts a lot.

The memories flood back into your brain.

You sit up as quickly as you can.

Your head hurts as you do it.

"Mike!"

You look up to see Jane running for you, running over and tackling you in a hug.

"Kid, let him breathe, geez –"

"Sorry," Jane mumbles, pulling away, but before you can say anything she leans in and kisses you on the lips. You squeak in surprise as she holds your face tightly in her hands, not even being gentle, just kissing you as hard as the two of you have ever kissed.

"Please don't do that in front of me, Jane, I'm begging you," Hopper groans.

Jane pulls away and turns to face Hopper, folding her arms in front of her chest. She looks to be in her pajamas, still, and she's glaring at Hopper.

"I will do whatever I like."

Hopper grimaces, looks like he's going to swear again, and then decides against it.

"Kid, you gave us a scare last night."

"Sorry," you mumble, blushing furiously still from the kiss.

"What happened?"

You shrug, looking down at your wrist, which has been bandaged properly now. You reach up to run your other hand through your hair, trying not to cry.

“Um... Um...”

Jane looks at you worriedly, tears in her own eyes.

“My grandpa was saying I should go to military school,” you mutter, “And so everyone was arguing about how terrible I am.”

Hopper sighs. Jane reaches over and wraps her arms tightly around you, squeezing you so tight you can’t breathe exactly right. But it’s nice anyway.

“And it was awful and I didn’t want to be there anymore and I snapped,” you finish.

“So you cut yourself, jumped out the window, and ran away to here?” Hopper asks. You nod.

“Well, I’m sure your mother’s figured out by now that you’re gone,” Hopper pauses, “I should let her know I found you...”

“I don’t want to go back!” you protest. Jane nods next to you.

“Yeah, Hop, don’t make him.”

“It’s not up to me. His parents are his parents, and they get to take care of him,” Hopper pauses, “But maybe I’ll wait a little bit to call...”

You don’t want to hurt your mom like that.

“No. You should call,” you sigh.

Jane makes a sound of annoyance, but says nothing more.

“Alright kid. I’ll be right back.”

Jane looks at you, now crying in full now. You cry with her, resting your head on her shoulder as you continue to cry.

"I'm sorry," you mumble.

"I'm sorry too," she whispers.

"I wish I hadn't done that."

"I understand why you did."

"I hate my Grandpa."

"I hate him too."

You smile at that, and she kisses you again, softer this time so that your heart flutters and your stomach does that swooping thing again. You reach for her hair, running your fingers through it, kissing her a second time before she can pull apart. She kisses you a third time, and now you don't feel like you can really stop, your heart beating very very fast as your fingers tingle a little.

"Um."

You break apart as fast as you can, you jumping back against the wall and looking at Hopper in terror. Jane is just blushing on the floor.

"Right. Anyway. Uh."

Hopper is having trouble forming words, and you're so mortified you want to sink into the floor.

"Your Mom wants you to come home right away, so I'll drive you after you've had some food. You need to get your blood sugar up, kid," Hopper finishes gruffly, "Jane, let's let him get dressed."

Jane follows him quickly as he forcefully shuts the door behind him, you putting on a change of clothes you'd packed with fear at the prospect of going home.

So you eat breakfast with them in half-silence, before you say goodbye to Jane and get driven by Hopper, with your bike in the back of the car, to your house.

"That was really stupid, kid," Hopper mutters after a while.

“Yeah, I know,” you sigh.

“You could have gotten really hurt coming over here.”

“I didn’t know where else I could go where she couldn’t find me.”

Hopper sighs again.

“Do you need to leave that house?”

“I... don’t know,” you admit quietly.

“There’s very little I can do about that, kid.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Just, try to keep yourself in one piece. If not for my sake, then for hers.”

“Of course.”

He gives you a look, and you look away, staring out the window and wishing you could be as certain as your words.

Hopper pulls up to your house, gives some bullshit speech to your mom, and you wait for reprimand. But all that happens is Bubbe comes over, pulls you into a hug, and doesn’t let go.

You don’t know why your mom isn’t yelling at you this time, but frankly, you’re not one for complaining when you actually get lucky at home for once.

So you cry, and you let Bubbe sooth you, and you hope next year Grandpa and Grandma don’t come for Thanksgiving.

Notes for the Chapter:

So two things:

Yes, I had Jane make up Slenderman. No, it means absolutely nothing. I just thought it would be a fun scary story for her to tell as she opens up to the Party more.

I didn't describe the Dungeons and Dragons Campaign because I've never played in my life and know only what I've got from cultural absorption, so I didn't want to write that

Also, I think I've figured out - FINALLY - what I want the overarching plot to be. That's the good news. The bad news is it's probably going to be longer than I thought it was going to be. Fack. Fackity fack fack fack. Ah well.

Thank you everyone for the wonderful comments, and please, keep them coming to feed your local starving grad student writer :) especially if Trump's tax bill passes and I won't be able to stay in school (: (: (: (that's my approximation of the upside-down smiley emoji in emoticon format)

12. Halfway Happy

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Bullying

DECEMBER 5 1984

JANE HOPPER

“So what is Hopper out doing, anyway?” Mike asks, snacking on popcorn as you watch a movie together – he’s finally showing you E.T., and you’re very excited about it.

You *did* want him to show you Star Wars, but the rest of the party insisted on being there for that.

You were impatient to see stars go to war.

“Uh, can’t say,” you murmur softly, looking away from Mike and snacking on more popcorn as the movie continues.

“Really? Why can’t you tell me?” Mike asks, surprised, looking over at you and smirking. His hair is getting even longer now.

He hasn’t hurt himself since Thanksgiving.

You’re very glad.

“Because it’s either a surprise or a let down and I don’t want to let you down,” you murmur.

Mike pauses the tape, causing the screen to go all wiggly. He turns and frowns at you.

“You can’t let me down, Jane...”

You sigh and shrug, looking away, “If you say so...”

You can let everyone down.

You *let* everyone down.

You opened the Gate.

But at least you closed it too.

After a bunch of people died and others got hurt.

But, you closed it.

“Jane? Jane, what’s wrong...”

You shrug, again, and don't say anything, just reaching to pick at your toenails.

“Jane, c’mon, talk to me.”

You look up at Mike, and realize only now you're crying.

“Thought spiral,” you whisper, without explanation. Mike nods, and immediately pulls you into a tight hug, holding onto you closely and not letting go.

“You can’t let me down. You can’t let me down. You can’t let me down. You can’t let me down. You can’t let me down. You can’t let me down – “

He keeps murmuring it, over and over, while you just listen to the soothing sound of him repeating the words.

It's a rhythm against you, just calm and soothing.

You can't let him down. You can't let him down. You can't let him down. You can't let him down. You can't let him down. You can't him down...

The door to the cabin opens and you jump up, running over to Hopper. He hangs his coat on the hook on the wall and looks at you in amusement.

“Yes?”

“Well?” you whisper.

“Well, what?” he jokes. You stomp your foot on the ground and glare

at him.

“I am so confused right now,” Mike groans from behind you.

Hopper smirks again, and hands you an envelope. You open it and pull out a piece of paper –

With JANE HOPPER written on it in big, block letters.

You look up at him in shock.

“Is this –“

“It is. You’re free, kid.”

You start crying, handing the paper back to him and falling on the floor.

“What the –“

“Jane has a birth certificate. She won’t be chased by the FBI... soon, anyway,” Hopper says.

“I’m so confused,” Mike groans, but he’s sitting next to you, holding you in his arms as you cry.

“The... secret experimental group that Jane comes from, they’ve relinquished her. Reluctantly. And soon the FBI goons that are doing their dirty work will stop looking for her, too,” Hopper explains.

“Wait – wait – really? Jane can leave the house?” Mike gasps.

“Not... quite yet,” Hopper pauses, “Doctor Owens thinks I should give it a year.”

“A *year*?” you shout.

“Well, he clarified that. You should be good to start school in the fall.”

You open your eyes wider.

“School?”

“Yup.”

“Real school?”

“Uh-huh.”

You jump up and run to hug Hopper around the middle. You turn around to see Mike grinning from ear to ear.

“You can probably risk a few trips between now and then? But nothing overboard,” Hopper pauses, “And you can go to the Snow Ball.”

You can’t believe it.

“I... can... go?” you breathe softly.

Mike’s eyes are wide, too.

“Really, Chief?”

“Absolutely,” Hopper pauses, “I’ll be outside, but she can go.”

You jump and hug Hopper again, wrapping your arms tightly around him. He pats you on the back and you turn to face Mike, who’s grinning at you.

“Uh, one piece of advice,” he suddenly says, frowning.

“What?” you ask, tilting your head to the side.

“Maybe just... not go with the punk look for one day, okay?” Mike smiles, “I think you look... uhhh...”

Mike pauses for a long time, looking up at Hopper in shock.

“Uh... nice. You look nice. With the punk. Clothing. And the makeup. But. You’re already going to stand out because you’re not a student, you know? No one will recognize you. I figure... if we’re trying to play it safe... maybe... uh... go a little more... like normal kids?” Mike grimaces, “I know, I’d rather you were yourself too, but...”

“No, it’s a smart idea,” Hopper says firmly.

You look at him and glare.

“But –“

“You want to go, you have to blend in.”

You sigh.

“I... uh...” Mike looks over at Hopper nervously, before looking back at you, “I promise, you’ll look beautiful no matter what.”

You look up at him and blush furiously and he blushes back at you.

“Okay that’s my cue to leave. Mike be sure to let me know when you want me to drive you home,” Hopper says, “Don’t want to bother Steve by making him drive out here again.” Mike nods, and Hopper goes to his room, closing the door behind him.

You turn to Mike happily and he looks at you with a wide smile on his face, leaning in to kiss you when –

Hopper pokes his head out of the door and shouts, “Please stay in the living room, don’t go to Jane’s room. Thank you.” He closes the door again, and you look up at Mike, blushing furiously.

“Um... this is what I didn’t want to spoil,” you mumble, looking down at your feet.

“Oh, cause it was up the air?”

“Yeah... last time we talked to Dr. Owens he didn’t think it would happen. I was... I was very upset.”

Mike wraps his arms around you again and squeezes you tightly.

“Even if it hadn’t happened, you wouldn’t have disappointed me, okay? That would have sucked but we could have figured it out. We’ve figured everything else together,” Mike pauses, “We’re a monster hunter and a psychic, no one can take us down.”

You snort.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“So are you!”

Mike and you giggle together and you lean in to kiss him on the lips, now certain Hopper is staying in his room. Mike squeaks and kisses you softly in return, before pulling away and blushing furiously.

“Um... um...”

“What?” you ask softly, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No!” Mike responds, “Sorry, just usually we kiss in more... dire... situations I guess? So I was surprised.”

“I thought, happy news, happy kiss –“

“No you’re right –“

“Do people kiss more than... we do?”

“Uh,” Mike’s eyes widen, “Some people, yeah. But we don’t have to do anything different than what we do already, you know? Who cares what other people do.”

You smile at him, and lean up to kiss him anyway. He squeaks.

You like kissing him.

You like the way your stomach swoops, and the way your fingers tingle, and the way your heart pounds faster.

You like it a lot.

Mike pulls away this time and smiles at you, leading you back over to continue watching the movie together. He doesn’t say anything, but his face is contorted in concentration.

“D’you have a calendar for next year?” he asks after a little while, stuffing popcorn messily into his mouth.

“Uh, no?”

“K, do you have some paper then?”

You nod, giving him your notebook and a pencil. He starts writing in it furiously, adding up numbers while you peer over his shoulder, until finally he looks up at you and smiles.

“Assuming you officially enter society on the first day of school next year,” Mike takes in a deep breath, “We have two-hundred and fifty-seven days to go.”

“Two-hundred and fifty-seven?” you ask softly. He nods.

“Yup. That’s the number of days between now and August 19th.”

You smile at him, “Two hundred and fifty-seven days.”

He leans over and kisses you, making you smile wider, before turning back to watch the movie together again.

Two hundred and fifty-seven.

After the past year, that was almost nothing.

Especially since you could see him again, even if it’s just a little.

D E C E M B E R 8 1 9 8 4

“Okay so do you have your sweatshirt?”

“Yes, Hop.”

“Do you have your hat?”

“Yes, Hop.”

“Do you have your fake glasses?”

“Yes, Hop!”

“Do you have –“

“Please stop! I have everything!”

“I just don’t want...”

“I know,” you reassure, reaching over and hugging him, “Don’t worry, no one is going to recognize me.”

Hop sighs, “Alright. Here’s my credit card,” he hands you a small card with numbers on it, “Be sure to buy yourself some other clothes, too. I still owe you those punk clothes I promised.”

You beam up at him as honking comes in from outside.

“Well, that would be them. Have fun. Don’t make too much trouble for Mrs. Byers,” Hop says firmly. You nod, and quickly skip out to the car.

Inside the car are Mrs. Byers, Nancy, and Max. All of them smile at you as you get inside, looking around from behind your glasses and underneath the hood of your sweatshirt.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding about Hop not letting you risk it,” Max laughs.

You groan, “Yeah, I’m not happy.”

“Well, making Hop happy is probably worth it,” Mrs. Byers sighs, “I can’t believe I’m doing him this favor...”

“Look at it this way, he helped you with your son, *twice*,” Nancy jokes.

“Fair enough. Now you didn’t tell Mike where we were going, did you?” Mrs. Byers asks.

“Nope. Just said I was coming over to hang out with Jonathan.”

“Jonathan knows that you said this, right?”

“Yes, of course! And Will is with Mike.”

“Good,” Mrs. Byers looks over at you and smiles, “You want it to be a surprise, well, it’s going to be a surprise.”

"I can't believe my mom wants me to buy something for this," Max grumbles.

"Don't you want to look pretty?" you ask softly, turning around to face her. Max scowls even more.

"I don't like the idea of 'pretty'. This is going to be a nightmare. I'm only going 'cause Dustin wants us all to go."

You nod, "Well I'm glad you're going."

Max smiles at you, "I'm glad you're going too, weirdo."

"I also want to buy more regular clothes," you say softly, looking at Mrs. Byers hopefully even though she can't see your face.

"Of course, honey, don't worry, Hop already told me," Mrs. Byers reassures as you continue to drive through the town towards the mall.

"Glad none of the boys are coming," Max mutters, "I'm getting sick of all the Dungeons and Dragons talk –"

"You don't like the game?" you ask, frowning.

"No, I *like* the game just fine, it's the *arguing* I don't like," Max groans.

"You weren't here for their big campaign of nineteen eighty-two," Nancy laughs.

"Oh I remember that!" Mrs. Byers snorts.

"They basically didn't talk to each other for a week –"

"Longest week of my life!"

Everyone starts laughing and giggling together as you pull up to the mall.

"I've never been to the mall before," you murmur.

"To be fair, you haven't been to lots of places before," Max jokes.

"It's really just a bunch of stores and people shopping at them. You'll be fine," Nancy reassures.

You all get out of the car and walk into the large store.

There are a lot of people there.

It's like Chicago but cleaner and smaller.

Lots of stores with lots of words –

You're very confused.

There are places for food, and places with clothes, and places with... books? And shoes, and... shiny things? And... colorful jars? And... chocolate?

You groan quietly.

"You alright sweetheart?" Mrs. Byers asks, as Nancy and Max immediately rush to you.

"It's... a lot..."

"Yeah, I guess it can be if you've never seen it before," Nancy admits, "Are you hungry? We can get you food..."

"Do they have Eggos?"

Nancy bursts out laughing.

"No, but they have better things. Come on," she reassures, and she leads you and the others to a restaurant with a lot of different kinds of food.

"What... should I get?" you ask.

"Here, I have a thing I think you'll like," Nancy says. You nod and sit down with Max at a table as Max reaches out with her hand.

"What... are you doing?" you ask.

"Wanna arm wrestle?" Max asks.

“Arm wrestle?”

“Yeah. I’ll teach you. Hold out your hand.”

You do so, frowning at Max as she pushes down your elbow to the table, holding up your arm and locking her hand with yours.

“Alright, the goal is to see which of us can knock the other down first. So you just push with you arm. Got it?”

You nod, and she suddenly frowns.

“No magic powers!”

You smile and nod again.

“Alright, on three start pushing as hard as you can. One... Two... Three!”

You push, struggling against Max as she pushes back, gritting your teeth and straining. Max is very strong, and she pushes against you hard as you struggle to keep your arm up.

She makes grunting and straining noises, too, so at least you know you’ve done your best.

“Come... on...” Max grunts.

You grin, “Having... trouble?”

Max glares, “Is this all you got?”

She strains harder, and you strain back, both glaring and smiling at each other as you do so. You burst into giggles as Max’s face grows quite red, and she glares at you harder, pushing down more and making your arm hurt.

“Ouch!” you shout, and before you know it she’s slammed your hand into the table, and you frown.

“Aww man –“

“Best two out of three?” Max grins.

“Or we could eat,” Mrs. Byers says, sitting down next to you with Nancy sitting next to Max. Mrs. Byers puts a tray in front of you with a large brown and white pastry in front of you, which seems to have some sort of icing all over it.

“It’s a cinnamon roll,” Nancy says with a grin, “You’re gonna love it. Use the fork though, it’s messy.”

You take your fork and stab it into the roll, breaking off a piece and chewing it.

It’s sweeter than any Eggo you’ve ever tasted.

Your eyes widen with excitement and you immediately start eating more and more of it, causing everyone around the table to laugh.

“Told you,” Nancy snorts.

They all turn to their own food, everyone happily eating a variety of things. You finish the cinnamon roll far too quickly and you frown at your empty plate.

“Maybe we can come back and get you another one to go home with?” Nancy offers. You nod happily.

“I think we should make Jane join an eating contest when she’s finally... you know,” Max says, laughing. You frown.

“There are contests for eating?”

“Oh yeah, you have to eat more than anyone else in a time limit,” Max explains eagerly, “Usually it’s hot dogs.”

You stick out your tongue.

“I don’t like hot dogs.”

“Yeah well your adopted father isn’t a great cook,” Mrs. Byers snorts.

“Really?” Nancy grins.

“Hopper couldn’t make decent food if his life depended on it, and it

does, so there's that. You should let me come over and cook more."

"Can you make decent food though?" Nancy teases.

"Well, no, but if I'm being compared to Hopper it's a low bar," Mrs. Byers rolls her eyes.

"How do you learn to cook?" you ask.

"Practice, and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears," Nancy jokes.

"I want to make Cinnamon Rolls..."

"Of course you do," she grins back at you.

"So! Today we have to find Jane a normal dress and related things for the Snow Ball, and then we get Jane some new clothes just for herself. Anything else anyone wants to do? Clothes for Max too?" Mrs. Byers asks.

Max grumbles.

"I will take that as a yes."

"I'm not getting a dress though."

"Nice pants, then."

"Can I look at other stuff too?" you ask softly.

"Like what, sweetie?"

"Books?"

"Absolutely!"

You all travel through the mall, going to large stores with all kinds of clothes. You try on dress after dress and you don't really like any of them – maybe you would have at one point, like last year, but now you just want things that match who you *are* more, not who you think you *should be*.

"How about this?" Nancy offers, holding up a green dress. You stick

your tongue out.

“Too many flowers.”

“I agree,” Max nods.

“Well how about this?” Mrs. Byers holds up a yellow dress. You actually grimace.

“That’s so... bright.”

“Yeah,” Nancy grimaces with you.

“Jane, how about you look around and pick something out for yourself?” Mrs. Byers offers.

You nod, and you explore around at all the dresses, looking between each of them. There are so many and your mind kind of spins.

You wish you could focus better.

You wander around, looking at everything, trying to decide which you actually like.

You see one that’s light blue, with puffy sleeves.

You remember *Anne of Green Gables* and how much Anne wanted the puffy sleeves.

You smile.

You grab it and bring it into the changing room, putting it on. It had all kinds of layers in the skirt that make you feel fancy, and there’s pink to remind you of your first dress, but not too much pink. And a belt! You like the belt and how it’s not *too* pretty. It feels... like you. Not punk. But not normal either.

You step out and look at the others and they all grin at you.

“Yup, that seems right,” Mrs. Byers says.

“You look really pretty,” Max agrees, “But still like you.”

“Mike is going to basically drop dead,” Nancy jokes.

You laugh with them, and go back inside to change back.

“Alright Max, your turn –“

“Oh come *on*.”

“You don’t have to wear a skirt!”

“I don’t want to wear anything!”

Your eyes widen and Max blushes.

“I didn’t mean that literally...”

“We’ll find some nice pants and a sweater, I promise,” Nancy reassures, “You won’t have to feel weird.”

Max grins and you all help her look around until she finds a sweater with colorful lines all over it, and bright orange pants. She doesn’t even try it on, just picks them out and brings them to the front with you.

“Can we go help Jane buy punk clothes now?” Max begs.

“Yeah, of course,” Mrs. Byers agrees.

You beam at them, and you all walk through the mall, searching around until you find stores with different clothing than the normal one you had been in before.

You eagerly grab almost everything off the shelves, from jackets to t-shirts with bands and things like skulls and snakes and crows on them, and bright red skirts and ripped jeans and black boots. You find gloves with no fingers, like the kind Kali had, and you grab them too. You also grab more makeup, not even caring as the woman behind the counter gives you a look.

“Did Hopper give you a budget?” you hear Nancy ask Mrs. Byers as you continue to grab things from around the store.

"Nope, he basically said 'let her wreak havoc on my credit.'"

"That's adorable."

"I hope he knows what he's doing."

"Jane! Can you buy me some too? Or let me borrow?" Max asks. You nod eagerly, and help Max pick out some stuff for herself.

You're in and out of that store much faster than you were in the normal store. You buy everything, and the number looks *very* big when it's all rung up, but Mrs. Byers doesn't do anything to stop you.

"Alright, so you said you wanted to look at books?" Mrs. Byers asks. You nod.

"Off we go, then!"

You all go upstairs into the book store, carrying many many bags of clothing with you, and you start running through all the different shelves.

There are *so many books!*

You are still overwhelmed, but you're so happy at all the books you don't notice it much.

There are books about space, and the ocean, and the jungle, and dinosaurs, and birds, and all sorts of things. You want to buy them all.

"Maybe limit the number of books? I'm just not sure how much room I have in the car," Mrs. Byers laughs, looking over at a stack of novels with pretty pictures on the front. Nancy is looking at books with big block letters like SAT on them, and Max is pulling out comic books from another corner.

You nod, and grab a bunch of the science books, bringing them over quickly to the counter.

"You like science, huh?" Nancy asks.

You nod.

“I understand it.”

“That’s good,” Nancy smiles at you.

“There are pictures that show me what everything is. And there’s so much stuff to learn.”

“Do you have trouble with words?”

“Sometimes,” you admit softly.

“I like the pictures too. You don’t get them as much in high school.”

You frown, “Do you get them sometimes?”

“Yeah, sometimes.”

You frown more.

“I’m worried...”

“You’ll be fine. Just keep studying for the next year. And we all will help you and teach you and make sure you get through it.”

“Thank you,” you murmur. Nancy hugs you, and you feel happy at that.

You’re glad you have everyone to help you, no matter how much you don’t deserve it.

Before you all leave, you grab another cinnamon roll in a box.

Today had been a good day, even without Mike.

D E C E M B E R 1 5 1 9 8 4

For once in your life, you don’t feel out of place.

Swinging in Mike’s arms in the gym where you once entered the void, listening to music, you feel almost normal.

There are plenty of girls here with short hair like yours, and no one gives you weird looks.

And Mike is looking at you with that look that makes you feel like you're melting in a good way.

And the music is nice, if too calm.

You just feel weird in a different way.

Maybe it's the song, but you feel like someone's watching you.

And it's not a good someone.

"I can't wait until this kind of thing is normal," Mike whispers softly.

"Me neither," you murmur.

"I want to... do so many things together."

"Like what?"

"Um... well we could go to the movies. You get to sit in a big theatre and watch a movie on a huge screen and eat a ton of popcorn," Mike explains, "It's better than the kind you can make at home."

You smile, "That sounds nice."

"And we could go ice skating!"

"What's that?"

"You have these special shoes that have blades on the bottom, and you use them to move around ice really fast!"

"That sounds scary..."

"I'll teach you," Mike says soothingly, leaning in and kissing you on the nose. You smile.

"What else can we do?"

"We can go to the park, and play in it, and maybe swing on swings

and stuff.”

“I like going outside,” you respond, as the song changes and you start swaying faster together.

“And – do you know how to swim?”

“Not really,” you admit.

“Well we should teach you that too! It’s very important. And then we can go swimming!”

“I don’t know if I’d like that...”

“Why not?”

“It would remind me of the tank...”

“Yeah, I guess I should have figured. Well you should still learn to swim, because if you don’t know how you could get hurt. But you can go as slowly as you want to make sure you don’t get too scared, or remember too much,” Mike reassures.

You smile at him, “Thanks.”

“Of course. And we can go to the Arcade!”

“With all the video games?” you ask. The party talked about it a lot.

“Yes! It’s so much fun you’ll love it.”

You smile at him, “I hope so.”

Everything is getting too crowded.

There are a lot of kids.

And they’re all around you.

And too close to you.

And you’re having some trouble breathing.

And you feel like they're all looking at you.

And you feel like someone's going to tell someone you're there.

And the Bad Men will find you again.

Even if they aren't looking for you they'll find you.

Papa is still out there...

Everyone's watching you and Mike...

You feel like everyone's watching you...

"Jane? Jane, are you okay?"

You look up at Mike, feeling sick to your stomach.

"Um. No," you whisper very, very softly.

Mike immediately grabs your hand and pulls you away, leading you gently out into the hallway of the school. You lean against the lockers and try to breathe.

In and out, In and out, In and out.

"Jane? Can you tell me what's wrong?"

Everyone staring.

Feeling trapped.

They'll find you.

They'll hurt you.

They'll take you back.

They'll kill Mike and everyone else.

Papa is going to find you.

You just start sobbing against the lockers, wrapping your arms tightly

around yourself. Mike touches you on the shoulder, but you flinch away.

“I need to g-g-go,” you breathe, hyperventilating.

“Jane? Jane, you’re scaring me,” Mike whispers.

You turn around, looking at him with tears streaking down your cheeks, “They’re going to f-f-f-find me –“

“No they’re not, Hop promised –“

“They’re gonna find me, and kill you, and take me b-b-back there –“

“No, they’re not. I promise. I promise,”

“How can you promise that?”

“Because I am never going to let anything bad happen to you again,” Mike whispers. His voice sounds like he’s trying to talk against sandpaper. You turn around and look at him to see he’s crying too.

“Mike...” you breathe.

Your heart is pounding.

And your mind is still spinning and spiraling down, down, down...

“Ha!”

You both turn rapidly to see a big hulky boy, with red hair and pale skin, standing in front of you in the hallway. Next to him is an equally large boy with blonde hair and pale skin.

“Knew it was fake,” the red haired boy said.

Mike steps in front of you, glaring, “Leave us alone, Sam.”

“I knew it! When you said you’d kissed a girl I knew there must have been something else going on. Bet she realized how weird you are and that’s why she’s crying,” Sam grins.

You look around Mike and all your thoughts snap back into place.

“Don’t worry, you’re way too pretty for Mike, I bet he’s the worst kisser in the world,” Sam says directly to you.

Mike is looking down at the ground, his hair all over his face. You step out in front of him, staring down Sam.

“Leave. Mike. Alone,” you mutter darkly.

Sam looks over at the other one and they laugh together, before he turns back to you.

“What are you going to do about it, bitch?”

Bitchin’.

But this sounds... bad?

You thought bitchin’ was good?

“You don’t want to know. Leave. Now.”

Sam laughs even more and comes up close to you.

Much too close.

You look up at him and your heart is in your throat and you feel very, very, *very* uncomfortable.

“You really are hot.”

Hot?

What?

“Get away from me,” you hiss.

“Like you can make me, you look like you’re as strong as a canary –“

“GET. AWAY. FROM. *US!*” you scream, and you focus, and you throw Sam back from you with your mind. He shouts and hits the opposite wall of lockers, hard, the metal reverberating through the hall.

The other boy looks in shock and runs to Sam, trying to help him up.

He groans and holds his head in his hands.

“What the fuck –“

“Mike is my boyfriend,” you say, firmly, “I love him. Leave him alone, and leave me alone, or you’ll have to answer to me.”

Sam scrambles to his feet and rushes at you, his hands balled into fists. You make a move to protect yourself in your mind again, but suddenly he’s being held back.

“Fuck off,” Mike snaps, “You heard her.”

Sam swings at Mike, but Mike ducks out of the way, reaching out with his arms to shove Sam away.

“You heard her!” Mike yells, screaming now, “Leave us alone!”

Sam rushes at Mike, but you throw him back again with the flick of your head. He hits the other boy now, and they both fall to the ground.

“What... the hell...” Sam coughs, doubling over in pain.

“Mike,” you murmur, “Let’s go.” You grab his hand and the two of you walk back over to the gym, as quickly as you can.

“Jane –“ Mike breathes.

“Let’s just dance. Or drink what everyone’s drinking?” you mutter. Mike nods and leads you over to the big bowl of red liquid, and he pours some out for you.

“It’s punch,” he mumbles, “Um... thank you.”

“Who are they? Mouthbreathers?” you ask softly.

“Real big ones,” Mike pauses, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told them I’d kissed someone.”

You frown, “Why not? You have.”

“Because... you shouldn’t kiss and tell, I guess,” Mike looks down at

his shoes.

“Why not?”

“I don’t really know. It’s just something people say.”

“I don’t mind, Mike.”

Mike smiles weakly at you and kisses you on the forehead, “Thanks, Jane.”

You sip the punch, which is very nice and sweet, and start walking back over to where everyone’s dancing. But Mike holds you back again.

“Jane?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

You smile back at him and kiss him.

It’s still a lot.

And you’re still scared.

But it’s nice to be reminded that you can defend yourself just fine.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well there's another new chapter! Hooray! Bonding and fighting off bullies!

I have good news and bad news for you all:

The good news is that I have written an outline and I know exactly where this story is going now

The bad news is that it's going to have 44 chapters and an epilogue

The other bad news is that that bill passed the House

of Reps so even if it doesn't pass the senate (and even if it does they have a version of the bill that's their own that doesn't have the grad student thing) about half of my country's lower house representatives think I don't deserve to exist so that's cheerful

The other good news is that you guys left so many comments on the last chapter!!!! You all have NO idea how happy each and every single one of them made me I was practically on cloud nine!!! :D :D :D

So yeah, leave a comment for a grad student who is very, very, very afraid of the future *finger guns*

13. Both Better and Worse

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for: Bullying, Antisemitism & Antisemitic slurs, Homophobia & Homophobic slurs, Self-Harm, and spoilers... for... the empire strikes... back???

JANUARY 12 1985

MIKE WHEELER

Hawkins, Indiana has exactly one synagogue.

Because it has to serve the entirety of Hawkins' Jewish population, and some people besides, it is non-denominational – with services that are more traditional and others more modern to serve both reform and orthodox leaning members of the community.

Not that there are many Jewish people to begin with. There are only a few dozen or so Jewish families in a town of only ten thousand people. Most everyone goes to the modern services, except for the three families who make a point to go to the Orthodox ones.

So you are familiar with feeling like an outcast.

It doesn't help that there are basically two interfaith families in the town, and yours is one of them. The other being your best friend.

You feel all eyes on you as you walk through town in a nicer suit for once, making your way back from the small little synagogue. You're dressed in what would be called "Sunday Best," except it isn't Sunday.

It doesn't help that your hair is starting to get ridiculously curly.

You walk through the town, kicking up rocks as you go, feeling like you're burning as everyone stares at you.

You can hear someone laugh.

You keep walking.

You should have waited for Mom, Nancy, and Holly to leave, but service was done, and you weren't really in the mood for Shabbat lunch with every other Jewish family from town, so you just left on your own.

Mrs. Byers was there again – she had fully re-joined and went every week, now – but not Will or Jonathan, so you didn't feel that guilty about leaving (okay, you felt a *little* guilty. But it's your right. You're Jewish.)

You make your way through the center of town, just trying to walk as quickly as you can back to your house. You just want to sit down and read or something.

Wishing you could see Jane today.

It's been one of those days.

You cut through an alleyway to try to get to your house quicker

"Hey! Loser!"

You turn around slowly, looking to see Sam and Pat walking up to you.

Again? Seriously?

"See your loser girlfriend isn't here to protect you today," Sam grins, sneering at you.

"Yeah, well, I can protect myself," you mutter.

"Don't think that's true. You're a wimp, you know that? And I bet she's your beard," Sam snorts.

"Yeah, you queer," Pat nods.

"Beard? No," you glare.

"She's your cover up for being a fag, admit it Wheeler," Sam says.

“No, she’s not. I love her,” you whisper, your heart clenching in your chest.

You don’t want to talk about her with them.

Jane and this part of your life exist in separate *planes of reality* and you don’t really feel like mixing them.

They’re getting too close to you.

“Oh yeah? Have you done it yet then, if you’re so not a fag?” Sam hisses, walking straight up to your face.

“No, because we’re thirteen, you gross son of a bitch,” you snap, and before Sam can get closer you grab your siddur and jab him in the stomach with the sharp corners.

“Ah!” Sam shouts, and he doubles in pain as you start to run away. Before you can get away, though, Pat grabs you and flings you against the sidewalk. You break the skin of your knee against the ground, and you can feel blood start to seep through your nice pants. You also have scratched up your face and the palms of your hands.

“Fuck!” you shout, turning around and looking up as Sam and Pat approach you.

“You know what we do to Jews like you, right, fucking kike?” Sam snarls. You look up at him as tears leave your eyes without permission.

“Ha! Look, he’s crying like a girl,” Pat grins.

“We fucking burn you,” Sam hisses, and before you know it there’s a kick going into your stomach, and another into your hips. You double over in pain, holding onto your stomach as they kick you in your legs and shoulders, and you start coughing up blood as they kick you in the chest.

“Fucking weak little shit –“

You try to get up, but everything hurts too much.

Another kick to your shoulder makes you pass out.

When you wake up, they seem to have left you behind, and you don't even want to think what state they thought you were in.

Everything hurts.

You manage to pull yourself to your feet, and you groan and stumble forward. Everything hurts, and you feel dizzy.

You keep walking, stumbling forward, until you reach the street. You want to just lie down again.

"Kid!"

You look up and see Hopper.

"What the..."

"Jane saw you. Get in," Hopper urges. You nod and get into the car, doubling over in pain.

"H... how..."

"She still visits you from time to time and she caught the tail end of the show," Hopper grunts, "Who were those boys?"

You shake your head.

"Kid –"

"No."

"Michael –"

"Don't, okay? They'll just make my life worse."

Hopper sighs, but keeps driving.

"I thought you said I couldn't see Jane today. We've passed my house," you mutter softly.

"You're not. I'm taking you to the hospital."

“Wh – what?”

“You passed out, kid. You could be seriously injured.”

“No!”

“Yes, and that’s final!”

You sit back, sulking, but everything hurts as you shrink into your seat.

You just want to see Jane.

“Kid, I’m sorry, but your health takes precedence, and we shouldn’t risk her leaving the house right now.”

You nod.

It still hurts though.

Stupid.

Stupid, worthless piece of shit.

Can’t even fight your own battles.

Have to have Jane constantly saving you.

Stupid idiot, egging them on. You should have just left.

And now everyone was fussing over you.

You hate that.

You hate that.

You hate that.

You hate that!

YOU HATE THAT!

You’re at the hospital now. Hopper helps you out the car, leading you

up to the building and letting you into the building and signing you in.

“Can you call his parents? Yes they’re at –“

You don’t want your parents there.

But you know Hopper won’t listen.

So you sit back and just wait to be taken into the hospital.

Hopper sits next to you, “How are you doing?”

You shake your head.

“Kid, I can press charges against them. They could go to juvie. Surely that’s better than continuing like this?”

You turn and glare at him, even though it hurts to move that much.

“They have friends. Just, drop it.”

He sighs, and looks ahead.

“How much trouble am I in?”

You look at him with a frown, “What are you talking about?”

“With Jane in High School next year.”

“What do you mean?”

Everything hurts when you talk.

“You and the other kids seem to have a lot of trouble with bullies. Coursework can be really difficult. Jane has... anger issues.”

You snort.

Understatement of the century.

“How much trouble am I in?”

“Might be good to teach her to control her powers,” you admit quietly.

Hopper sighs, “Yeah.”

“Jump over that bridge when you get to it,” you mutter.

Hopper snorts, “Fair enough, kid. Looks like they’re going to talk to you.”

You give them information on what happened, and are taken back to be examined.

Eventually you find out that you bruised some ribs and damaged your lungs and stomach, but no major damage happened besides that and some rough bruises all over your body.

“Lucky your attackers were as young as you are,” the doctor commented, “Not strong enough to do major damage.”

“Why’d I pass out, then?” you mutter softly.

“The pain, I imagine,” the doctor pauses, “I advise you to stay overnight.”

You dread your parents coming.

You hold your wrists firmly against the bed so no one can see them.

“It’s going to be okay, kid,” Hopper murmurs, but you don’t really want to hear it from him. Not today.

Nothing is ever going to get better.

Jane is the peak of your “getting better” and everything else will remain the same.

Eventually your parents come in.

“Michael, Michael are you okay –“ Mom starts to ramble, and she reaches over for you and checks you over while you hold your arms rigidly at your sides.

Your dad doesn't say much of anything.

"I'm fine, Mom, I'm –"

"No, you're not fine –"

"What happened, Michael?" Dad asks quietly. You look up at him and swallow.

"Um... I was walking home from shul because I didn't feel like staying for lunch, and I cut through an alley to get home faster. Then these two bullies from school found me and started making fun of me. I... I um... I told the to leave me alone and they just... kept making f-fun of me... and then they started to beat me up..." you mumble.

"Why were they making fun of you?"

"Saying I was gay, anti-Semitic stuff, you know... the usual," you whisper.

Dad leaves the room.

Mom watches him go for a minute before turning back to you.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, Mom," you mumble, "I should have stayed."

"Well, at the very least you shouldn't have cut through an alley."

"Probably not, no..."

"You just rest. You'll heal, that's what the doctors are saying."

"Great," you mutter, but you wish your dad was still there.

JANUARY 13 1985

"You need to learn to defend yourself, son."

You look at your dad, having just gotten home, wanting to go upstairs and walkie with Jane. It was easier than her using her

powers (and made you seem less crazy), though she had called you through the Vod the night before.

“Dad, I’m fine.”

“Son, let’s talk.”

He hadn’t talked to you all of yesterday.

You go with him into the living room and sit across from him, wishing you could leave.

“Son, are you gay?”

You shake your head.

“Nope.”

“Good.”

“Why... is that good?” you ask softly.

“Because homosexuals are sinning against man and God, son,” Dad says, “And they pay the price of that. Have you heard of that new cancer that only affects gay people? Do you want to get sick and die like them?”

“I’m not gay, Dad,” you whisper, but now you feel like ice all over.

You’re not.

But him saying these things feels so wrong and evil that you can’t even think properly.

“Do you have a girl you’re interested in?” he asks, frowning at you.

“Yes...”

“Can we meet her?”

“No,” you say, your throat clenching a little, “Um... she’s very shy.”

“Is it that Russian girl from last year?”

You grab your walkie and tune it as quickly as you can, gasping into it while you try not to cry.

“Jane? Jane? Jane, please, Jane, please, Jane come in –“

“M-Mike?”

The connection is patchy. You can barely hear her.

“Can you v-visit me? Please? Please, now?”

“Yes.”

You drop the walkie and start sobbing heavily.

“Mike?”

Her voice, as always, is soft – barely audible. Like a feather tickling your ears.

It brings you such relief to hear that you burst into tears finally.

“Mike, what’s wrong?”

“Jane, Jane, Jane –“ you sniffle, and suddenly you burst into tears, unable to stop yourself. You just hunch over and hold your knees, rocking back and forth in pain.

“Mike, you’re scaring me –“

“Jane –“

“Mike talk to me –“

“Jane, I’m. I’m. I-I-I’m...”

“Mike –“

You just burst into more tears, falling over on the floor and holding your face into the carpet.

“Mike...”

You can't really say anything.

You're too wound up in everything.

Everything hurts too much.

"Mike, say something –"

You just keep crying, curling up into a ball.

You want to hurt yourself.

You want to hurt yourself so bad.

But everything hurts already.

But you want to hurt yourself.

You want to release some pain.

A part of you doesn't want to exist.

It's a large part.

"Mike, okay, I'm – just – just don't do anything –"

You just keep crying.

You don't hear anything from Jane for a while. And none of your family members come up to check on you (granted, Nancy is out).

She left you.

She left you.

Why did she leave you?

You hold onto your hair tighter and curl up in on yourself.

You cry.

Harder and harder and harder and harder.

No one wants you.

No one wants you.

No one needs you.

No one –

The doorbell rings.

“Yeah, he’s in his room.”

You sit up and rapidly try to make it look like you weren’t crying.

Who was over for you?

The door creaks open and you look up to see Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Jane.

“Wh... what?” you whisper. Everyone rushes up to you, Jane picking you up from the floor and holding you against her.

“I begged Hopper and told him you were really in trouble,” Jane whispers, holding on to you and looking at you. Her face is very pale.

“And he let you come?” you whisper.

“First he made me grab the others but, yeah,” Jane pauses, “I had to wear my sweatshirt and stuff...”

You see she’s in very baggy clothing and nod.

“We were going to grab Max, too, but she’s not having a great day herself and doesn’t think she’d be much help,” Lucas admits.

“Thanks guys,” you mutter.

“We’re sorry Sam and Pat got to you again,” Dustin grumbles, “We should all go find them and let Jane –”

“No,” you whisper, “Jane can’t always be there.”

Jane nods next to you, looking down at her lap.

“Did something else happen, though? You seemed fine when we came by yesterday,” Will murmurs.

You look at him and you swallow back more sobs.

“Dad said some stuff.”

Everyone nods in understanding. Jane wraps her arms tightly around you and squeezes.

“Do you want to do something fun to get your mind off of it?” Dustin asks, “We could finally watch Star Wars –“

Jane perks up a little next to you.

“Doesn’t Max want to be here for that?” you ask quietly.

“Oh yeah...”

You look down at your knees and just stare at them as your thoughts start to intrude on you again.

“Mike? Earth to Mike.”

You look up at Dustin quietly.

“Do you want to talk? We can also just talk,” Will murmurs.

You shake your head.

“Why not?” Jane whispers.

“Don’t want to worry you guys.”

“Newsflash, we’re already worried,” Dustin says.

“Yeah, man. Maybe bottling this stuff up is what lead to last year being so awful?” Lucas suggests.

You look up at them all again.

“It’s hard to talk about.”

“Mike.”

You turn to look at Jane. She reaches out to hold your face in her hands, and you blush furiously because *all of your friends are watching you*.

“Talk.”

You swallow.

You can’t say no to her.

Her eyes are so beautiful and are intensely staring into yours and *how are you supposed to say no to her?*

“Okay...”

You turn away, still looking at your knees.

“Dad... asked me if I was gay. And I told him no, because, y’know, I’m not...”

“What’s gay?” Jane whispers quietly.

“Uh...” you mutter.

“It’s when a guy wants to kiss other guys instead of girls,” Dustin explains.

“Or a girl wants to kiss other girls instead of guys,” Lucas interjects.

“Oh,” Jane says, “Okay. Is that bad?”

“No,” Lucas says immediately. Everyone looks at him.

“What? It’s not. My uncle’s gay.”

“Lots of people think it is, though,” Will mutters.

“Those people are wrong,” you interject softly. Will nods.

“And one of those people is Mike’s Dad,” Dustin explains.

“Oh,” Jane pauses, “Why does he think you’re gay?”

You shrug.

“I don’t think he does. Bullies just call me that a lot.”

“Why?”

“Cause... I dunno...” you mumble.

“Because people are stupid,” Dustin says. Jane nods next to you.

“So they use that as a reason to beat me up,” you sigh.

“And your dad asked you if you were gay, too?” Jane asks.

“Yeah. And then he said a bunch of stuff about how gay people are evil and deserve to die,” you mumble, “And then he blamed me for getting beat up and told me to get tougher. Also he asked about you.”

“About... me?” Jane says in confusion.

“Yeah. He needed proof I’m not gay, so he wanted to know if I had a girlfriend,” you mutter, “And then he asked to meet you.”

Jane immediately gets up and everyone shouts at her to come back, but she stomps downstairs before you can grab her.

“Shit –“ Dustin mutters and everyone piles out, following her downstairs.

“Jane, don’t –“ you beg, but she doesn’t listen to you.

“Mike’s Papa?” she says firmly, standing in the living room. Dad looks up.

“Uh... yes? What’s your name.”

“I am Jane.”

“Nice to meet you –“

“I am Mike’s girlfriend.”

“Ah, he mentioned you today.”

You feel like melting into the floor.

“Mike is not gay.”

“I can see that.”

“And being gay isn’t bad.”

Dad frowns at her.

You want to die.

He’s going to take this out on you you know it.

“Young lady –“

“It’s just about who you want to kiss. Why does that matter?”

“Young lady, I’m afraid if you want to talk to me like that in my house, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“You should be nicer to Mike,” she says, firmly, before walking back upstairs. You watch her go with tears in your eyes.

Dad looks at you.

“We’ll talk later.”

You nod, and quickly run upstairs after Jane. The rest of the party follow you.

“Jane, how could you?” you shout, tears falling out of you eyes. Jane looks at you and frowns.

“I was helping –“

“You didn’t help at all! Now my dad is going to yell at me for that! And he’ll probably tell me to break up with you or something!”

“Break... up?”

"It's when people stop being girlfriend and boyfriend," Dustin mutters softly.

"You made him madder! You shouldn't have said anything!" you scream.

"But he was being mean –"

"And now he's going to be meaner!"

"But he hurt you!"

"And now he's going to hurt me more!"

"I don't like it when people hurt you!"

"I didn't say it was okay for you to do that!"

Jane is crying, and so are you.

"I'm... I'm sorry –" Jane mumbles.

You keep sobbing, falling on the floor and holding your face in your hands.

"Should I go?" Jane whispers, her voice shaking.

You look up and shake your head. You hold out your arms for her and she rushes into them.

"I forgive you," you mumble.

"You do?"

"Yeah. And I shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm sorry too."

"I forgive you too," Jane mumbles back, and you both cry together.

"I don't like fighting with you," you whisper very quietly.

"I don't like it either."

"I was upset and scared and I took it out on you and I'm sorry –"

“And I just wanted to protect you and I didn’t think and I’m sorry –“

You both hold tightly to each other and you cry into her hair. It’s so soft and curly you want to stay there forever.

“Uh... should we like... go?” Dustin asks. You hear him wince and look up to see Lucas whacking him in the arm.

“No,” you mutter quietly.

“How bad is your dad going to take this out on you?” Lucas asks.

“I dunno. He might just scold me.”

“What if he does tell you to... break up? With me,” Jane whispers very, very quietly, so quietly you’re not sure anyone else can hear.

“Then I’ll tell him to fuck off. I’m not going to,” you say firmly.

Never.

“Okay,” Jane mumbles.

“Well let’s do something together, okay?” Dustin says, “Let’s do something to take your mind off of it.”

You nod, and you all work together to start building Legos together, and its enough to take your mind off of how terrible everything was for the rest of the evening.

F E B R U A R Y 1 8 1 9 8 5

Today is your birthday.

Today you turn fourteen.

Things with your Dad have only been getting worse. Though his reprimand for Jane hadn’t been as bad as you thought it would be, he still found more and more opportunities to yell at you for your behavior.

And you’ve started to cut yourself again.

“Just, hold still,” Jane urges, grabbing your arm and wrapping a tight bandage around it.

“Ouch, Jane –“

“Please, it’ll be over faster if you hold still.”

“Okay, fine.”

Jane finishes tying it up and checks to make sure it’s firmly on.

“Okay.”

“Thanks...”

“Yeah.”

She sits next to you, both staring out into space in the cabin. Even though Hopper thought you were coming over too much, you had come over right away anyway.

“Can you at least try to do it less badly?” Jane mumbles quietly.

“I do, this was an accident.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay.”

She doesn’t say anything for a long time.

“What made it happen today?”

“Dad yelled at me that I have to be more of a man.”

“Why?”

“It’s my birthday.”

“Birthday?”

"You know," you frown, "The day you turn another year older. The day you were born."

"Oh..."

"It's supposed to be special. You get a cake and presents and stuff."

"I didn't get you anything..."

"Being able to see you is enough of a present," you mumble. She looks at you and blushes.

"It... is?"

"Yeah. Last year was awful."

She frowns at you, "Is this year any better, though?"

"Yeah. A little," you take a deep breath, "Um. You help me pull myself out of it better."

"But...? Why do you keep doing this then?"

"Because other things are worse. My parents fight more. With each other and my dad yells at me more. My mom doesn't yell at me anymore though."

"That's good..."

"And the bullies are worse again."

"Yeah. I hate them."

"I know."

"I want to kill them."

"Please don't."

"Okay."

"And I'm scared of a lot of things..."

“Like?”

“If we didn’t fully close the gate –“

“I did!”

“I know, but... the Mind Flayer knows about us now. Do you ever think he could come back?”

“Sometimes...”

“And high school starts next year. It’s going to be harder. What if I can’t keep up? What if you can’t adjust? I want to protect you from people but... I can’t always.”

“We’ll get through it together.”

You smile at her, “Thanks, Jane.”

She pauses for a long time, just looking at you. She’s wearing dark makeup again (she doesn’t always, but most days), and her hair is all curly and soft, and she has a Clash shirt on. You love it when she looks so comfortable as... herself. For once.

Plus the dark eye makeup makes her eyes stand out and then you get lost in them and it’s one of the nicest feelings...

“Mike.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Your heart does a little flip, like it does every time she says that.

“I love you too...”

“Every time you do this you hurt me.”

You start crying, holding your face in your hands.

Stupid.

Selfish.

Idiot.

Awful.

Horrible.

Person –

“Mike, stop.”

You look up at her.

“But –“

“I know you can’t control it. I know it’s... addictive,” she frowns,
“Right? That’s the right word, right? It’s addictive.”

You nod.

“But... I just want you to remember that. If you ever... can control it.
Please?”

You nod again.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and she rests her head on your shoulder
for a long time as you sit there in silence together.

“I’m glad you were born,” she murmurs.

“I’m glad too,” you say, and for a minute there you can believe it.

“Should we call over the others?”

“Why?” you ask softly.

“I think we should watch Star Wars.”

You grin before you can stop yourself.

“Okay!”

Everyone comes over right away, even Nancy and Jonathan and Steve and Mrs. Byers, and you all crowd around the TV together and watch the movie with bowls and bowls of popcorn.

“So what’s this about? The words moved up too fast,” Jane murmurs as the movie starts.

“Uh, there’s a war in space,” you whisper.

“Why?”

“Just watch okay?” you hiss back, and everyone settles in. Jane asks a *lot* of questions as the movie continues.

“Why can’t they see that there are people in the pod?”

“Because they aren’t alive, they’re robots.”

“What’s a robot?”

“A machine that can think.”

“Why don’t they count as alive?”

“Because... uh...”

“Shh!”

More popcorn chewing, more movie, Aunt and Uncle dying –

“What happened?”

“They got burned alive.”

“Is that what that thing is?”

“Yeah it’s a skeleton –“

“Why did they get burned?”

“Because they had the droids...”

“Shh! Geez!”

The movie keeps going and Jane grows more and more quiet as she gets more and more into it, looking very enthused as the action unfolds. The adults are talking quietly in the corner, and keep looking at you with that face that adults get when they're worried but don't want to show it, but other than that you manage to pull yourself out of your spiral.

It helps that Jane is so close to you, and all your friends are too.

"I liked that a lot," Jane says, turning to smile at you as the movie ends and everyone starts talking.

"Do you want to watch the next one?" you ask, and Jane nods, smiling. You grin back at her.

"Hopper can we watch the next one –"

"Fine, fine. If you kids want to make this a sleepover I guess that's fine."

"Yay!" everyone shouts.

"I'll go call Mom," Nancy snorts, walking out of the room quickly. Both Jonathan and Steve look visibly relieved at that.

You know something is up with the three of them, but you've been so... turned inwards... you haven't been able to ask.

"I'm sorry we can't watch the last one," you say to Jane, "it's not on tape yet."

"It's alright. Can you tell me what happens?" she asks softly as the movie starts.

"NO!" you, Will, Dustin, and Lucas shout together. Max snorts at you all, rolling her eyes.

"I'll tell you, Jane, you shouldn't have to wait –"

"Don't ruin the movie for her!" you snap.

"She should see it first!" Dustin agrees.

“It’s just not *right* to have it ruined –“ Lucas throws in.

“I agree, but maybe Jane should decide...” Will mutters.

“Is it really important for me to see it?” Jane asks, frowning.

“Yes!” you say, looking at her with wide eyes and nodding quickly.

“Alright, then I will wait,” Jane says as she frowns more, but nods.

“We’ll find a smaller theatre, I think some of them are still playing it,” you reassure.

“Uh uh, not until she’s free. We’ve been risking her safety enough as it is –“

“Hop!” Jane whines.

“No!”

“Fine,” Jane grunts.

“No one tell her how it ends!” you shout, and you start the second one.

Jane is quiet the whole way through, just eating popcorn and watching it with wide, excited eyes. You often find yourself watching her more than the movie, just to see how cute she is.

She only breaks her silence and eagerness at the critical moment.

“Wait, *what?*” Jane shrieks.

“Jane –“

“Darth Vader is Luke’s *father?*”

“Shhh –“

“But Obi-Wan said he was dead!”

“Jane just listen –“

Everyone is trying to get her to calm down, but you're just so happy to see her this excited about your favorite movie that you don't care.

"How can he be his father?"

"Because Obi-Wan was lying," you say, giggling with her and feeling warmth extend from your feet to your fingers.

"But... but... why would he lie?"

"I mean, would *you* want to tell this kid you are resting all of your hopes on that his father's evil?" you say softly. Jane looks at you and frowns, before her face lights up.

"Wait –"

"Could you be *quiet!*" Lucas whines.

"No," Jane says simply, making Dustin and Max burst into laughter together.

"Luke has an evil father –"

"Yes," you say, frowning at her.

"And he can move stuff with his mind!"

"Basically."

Jane grins at you happily, "I'm like Luke!"

You raise your eyebrows at her.

"My god, you are –"

"She is!"

"Didn't I basically say just that when we met?"

"Yeah but we didn't know the evil dad part –"

"But –"

“Max if you tell her the ending of the last movie I’ll stop letting you beat me at Dig Dug.”

“Let you?”

“I’m your boyfriend, of course I’m letting you.”

“That’s complete bullshit and you know it –“

“Can you prove it?”

“You aren’t even better than *Dustin!*”

“Hey!”

“I’m a Jedi,” Jane murmurs as the rest keep fighting, and you look at her and beam.

“Yeah. You’re a Jedi, not a Monster,” you whisper softly into her ear. She looks at you for a long time.

“I’m both. But thank you,” she mumbles.

You’re too exhausted from your own bad day to argue.

So you just kiss her happily on the forehead and hold her tightly to her, glad your birthday ended on a high note.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'd say I'm sorry for the dark stuff in this chapter, but we all know I'm not *finger guns* I included some fluff to make up for it?

I AM sorry for uploading this chapter before some of the regular reviewers got to the last one, and right before the scheduled AO3 site maintenance. That's my bad, but I wanted to finish it before Friday night Shabbat, so... here we are.

Is Mike queer in this story? Truthfully I don't know. He's definitely in love with/attracted to Jane

(obviously), but I haven't decided if he's bi or not... as a nonbinary person I'd love to touch on trans issues in the 1980s, but frankly I'm not sure I'm up for that task, A, and B this story already has enough going on as it is. So you can headcanon the characters as whatever you want, but I'm not touching on gender identity. There will be more sexuality stuff in the future though.

As for Mike & Janes fight - there isn't a couple in the world that doesn't fight. It's going to happen from time to time. But drama is stupid and I am already anticipating the Duffer brothers including pointless drama in the rest of Stranger Things, so there won't be "breaking up" or any of that crap with Mileven. I'm not here for that *old enby shakes fist at cloud*

Please comment! Didn't get as many last time as the chapter before (Don't let the comment count fool you. It's all a thread between me and another person in which we act ridiculous) and I really want to hear your feedback!!! Thanks :) :) Shabbat shalom my homies

14. Marks Like Yours

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for discussions of the Holocaust (Shoah)

MARCH 1 1985

JANE HOPPER

“Hop, when’s my birthday?”

Hopper looks up at you and frowns, “Hmm?”

“The day I was born. When is it?”

“Oh,” Hopper reaches into the drawer where all the “important papers” are in the cabin, and pulls out your birth certificate.

“April 27th. So you turn fourteen in close to two months,” he says, putting it away as you look at him expectantly.

“What... is up?”

“Can everyone come over again?”

“Sure, kid.”

He goes to sit back down and read your history essay when you stand by him expectantly again.

“Uh... something else? You know I need to focus on this.”

You swallow, and look at him firmly, “I’m lonely here all day.”

He sighs, “I know, Jane.”

“I can’t always visit Mike, it hurts my head.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry.”

“And he has school and you have work and he can’t come over that often anyway.”

“Yup, that would be the problem.”

You take a deep breath, “Stuffed animals aren’t alive.”

“Wow, I’m shocked. I never knew.”

You glare at him and fold your arms tightly across your chest.

“Continue, kid.”

“Can I get a puppy?”

Hopper drops the sheet of paper he was holding up on the floor and looks at you in shock.

“A – what?”

“A puppy.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re a lot of responsibility and hard to handle.”

“But I’m lonely.”

“I know, but it’s a lot of work –“

“I’m home *all day* –“

“They need to go outside –“

“You can go outside with them!”

“Kid, I don’t have time to take a dog on walks.”

You frown, cross your arms in front of your chest, and huff off.

“I’m sorry!”

You harrumph again, and slam the door with your mind, sitting in your room grumpily.

MARCH 6 1985

“Hop?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Tomorrow is the... poo – rim carnival? At Mike’s synagogue.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Can I go? He’d really like me to go.”

Hop looks up at you and sighs.

“I’m not sure. It’s not safe.”

“Nothing is safe!”

“Kid, you know I’ve been as flexible as I can be. But we have to save your outings for when Mike is having a breakdown.”

You feel tears come to your eyes.

“But if I don’t see him when he’s *not* having a breakdown then he’ll have a breakdown...”

“If this were something different I probably would let you go. But the synagogue doesn’t have many people come to it as it is. You’d draw a lot of attention to yourself.”

“How is this any different? How is this supposed to be *helping him*?”

“Look, kid, I have a compromise.”

“*Again?*”

“I know for a fact the Wheelers do a huge seder meal with their whole family for Passover –“

“Pass... over?”

“The next big holiday for Jewish people.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Their whole Jewish family comes over for it. You can go to that, if Mike wants you to.”

“Why that?”

“Because it’ll be in his house with his family and not a huge synagogue where anyone could see you.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“It’ll probably not be as fun as the carnival, but you can go to the carnival next year.”

You let out a long, exhausted (a new word!) sigh.

“*Fine.*”

“Don’t get all sassy-teenager on me kid.”

“Too late.”

Hopper grins at you.

You frown.

“... What?”

“Can I have a cat?”

“*What?*”

“Can I have a cat?”

“A *cat*? I thought you wanted a *dog*!”

“I changed my mind.”

“I hate cats.”

You glare.

“I want one.”

“Didn’t you get ordered to kill one?”

“... Yes.”

“Didn’t that traumatize you?”

“... yes...”

“*So why do you want a cat?*”

“You won’t let me get a dog.”

Hop lets out a very long sigh.

“Kid...”

“I want a pet.”

“Any pet?”

You glare at him.

“No fish.”

“So a pet rock is okay?”

“*Hopper!*”

“So a pet rock is *not* okay?”

“Hooooop –“

“Fine. I will start looking into getting you a *manageable pet*. But no promises.”

You beam at him, and skip back to your room.

MARCH 24 1985

“One hundred and forty-eight days to go,” Mike says softly.

“We can do this,” you agree softly.

You’re visiting him in the Void.

It’s not as good as being with him.

It never is.

“Why is my dad like this.”

“Because he’s a mouthbreather.”

Mike laughs quietly.

“Did you tell your mom?”

“Not this time...”

“Didn’t want another fight?”

“I hate that just as much as I hate him yelling at me, so, no.”

“Yeah...”

Mike makes a move with his hand.

“If you hurt yourself no kisses for a week.”

“Jane!”

“It’s my only bargaining chip.”

“Bargaining chip? You know what that is?”

“Hopper used it the other day.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, I guess it is.”

He sighs and drops his hands at his sides, looking into his lap.

“I don’t want to go to school tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t. It sucks.”

“I’m sorry Mike.”

“The bullies are bad. And the teachers are mean. And everything sucks.”

“At least you can read.”

You say it before you can stop yourself.

“Jane,” Mike whispers.

“S... sorry.”

“You should really tell an adult...”

“I’m... embarrassed.”

“Why are you embarrassed?”

“I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid! You’re really really smart. Super smart,” Mike looks in what he knows is your direction eagerly, “Jane you’re super smart. This isn’t your fault. But you need help.”

“Okay... doesn’t that make me stupid though?”

“Not at all. I had a lot of trouble concentrating as a kid and they had to help me, too. Am I stupid?”

“No!”

“Then neither are you.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Of course, Jane.”

A P R I L 5 1 9 8 5

You're in your nicest dress.

Any makeup you have on your face is very light.

Mrs. Byers did your hair all nice and curly. It goes down to your shoulders now.

Hopper is standing next to you and ringing the doorbell.

He spent the entire drive over grumbling about how "that Harrington kid's resume is actually good and he can't in good conscience not hire him to train him for the police force but dammit if he's going to put up with his shenanigans."

You don't really pay attention to that, because... well...

You are so nervous you feel like you're going to vomit.

The door opens and Mrs. Wheeler look at you.

"Hi Jane! Nice to see you again. And you, Chief," she nods.

Hopper is in a suit.

He looks very uncomfortable.

"Uh... yes. Can we come in?"

"Of course, of course. Please take off your shoes at the entrance."

You slip out of them and walk into the living room.

There are... a *lot* of people there.

Mike is standing there, in a suit, with a weird small hat on his head. He smiles at you when you walk in.

Besides him, you only recognize Mike's dad, and Holly, and Nancy.

Everyone else is new.

"Everyone, this is Jane, Mike's girlfriend," Mrs. Wheeler introduces, walking up behind you, "And her adopted father, Chief Hopper."

Hopper waves awkwardly.

“I didn’t know you’d adopted a daughter,” a man asks, frowning.

“Uh... yeah. I knew her mom. We all were close,” Hopper says, still awkwardly, “So when she lost her mom I was the first choice for taking her in.”

The man nods, and everyone goes back to mingling. Mike runs up to you.

“I should introduce you to everyone, c’mon,” Mike says, grabbing your hand and leading you around the room.

“This is Zayde, or my mom’s dad,” Mike says hurriedly, leading you over to an old man with a pale face and white, wispy hair. He smiles at you, and reaches out to shake your hand.

You see numbers on his arm.

You look up at him in shock.

Mike looks at you with wide eyes.

What...?

“Yes, a gift from Mr. Hitler,” Zayde says in a very thick accent, pulling back. He has a glint in his eye, “But we won, didn’t we?”

You nod, not saying anything, because you have a feeling you’ll say something wrong.

“Was a young man when I got taken into the camps. Managed to survive though. That’s what runs in our family, Jane. Runs in me, runs in my daughter, runs in Michael. Are you a survivor?”

You nod, furrowing your brow.

You wish you looked like yourself. Then you’d convince him.

But Zayde breaks into a grin.

“I thought so. You look like one. You know, you can talk, I’m not

going to bite.”

You swallow, “Sorry, I’m shy.”

That’s what Hopper and Mike told you to say.

“My wife’s shy. It’s what got her through, though. Bubala!”

A tall woman walks over, her hair a dark grey, with glasses on her eyes.

“This is my wife and Mike’s Bubbe,” Zayde explains, bringing the woman over.

“Mom’s mom,” Mike mutters to you quietly.

You shake Bubbe’s hand. She also has a string of numbers on her arm.

“Nothing to be afraid of, sweetie,” Bubbe says softly as you look at it, in the same thick accent Zayde has.

“I’m not afraid,” you murmur.

“See? Survivor. Good job, Mike,” Zayde says gruffly.

“I think so too,” Mike says, smiling at you awkwardly. You smile back at him.

“Are you Jewish, sweetie?” Bubbe asks you softly.

“No,” you say, bowing your head, “I’m sorry.”

“Oh that’s okay. You seem willing to learn, at least,” Bubbe looks over at Mike’s dad and glares.

“Let’s not start that now,” Zayde sighs.

“Start... what?” you ask.

“Oh dear, you don’t want to be involved in all that,” Zayde shakes his head, “Long family problem. You understand.”

You don't, but you pretend like you do.

"I'm going to introduce Jane to everyone else, okay?" Mike says. Zayde and Bubbe smile at you and let you leave, and you walk around the room with Mike.

"This is my Uncle Dan, and my Aunt Quinn... their kids Mark and Lily and Polly... Aunt Emma... Aunt Olivia and my Uncle Carl, and their kids Esther and Becca..." Mike goes around, introducing all of his family members. They all wave and say hi to you and ask you questions, but you are so overwhelmed by... everything... again... that you can barely talk.

"Come on, we have time before dinner starts," Mike mutters when he's finished, pulling you away to another room.

"What were those numbers, Mike?" you ask softly.

"Haven't you read about this for history?" Mike whispers as you back into the corner.

"Read about *what*?"

"The Holocaust."

"When did that happen?"

"Nineteen forties."

"Oh, no, I haven't gotten that far. I'm in the late eighteen-hundreds now."

Mike sighs.

"Okay... um... this is going to be really hard to explain."

"You don't have to –"

"No, no I really do. Okay. Um. At the beginning of the nineteen hundreds there was this war and the British and Americans won, and the Germans lost."

“Okay.”

“The Germans had to pay a bunch of money because they lost.”

“Uh... okay...”

“And, like, people have hated Jewish people on and off for... basically forever.”

“Why?” you ask, looking at him in shock.

Who could hate *Mike*?

“Um... long story. That’s a story for another time. But it’s stupid,” Mike says, “So, you know, they weren’t right to hate us or anything.”

You nod.

“Well, in Germany, there were a lot of money problems? Lots of people were poor, because of all that money being spent because they lost the war. So they blamed the Jewish people of the country.”

“But...”

“Yeah, it doesn’t make any sense, but the leader of Germany was really persuasive. Basically lied and tricked everyone into blaming the Jewish people.”

“Who was the leader?”

“That... uh... that Hitler guy Zayde mentioned.”

“Oh...”

“So, they started rounding up all the Jewish people of the country into camps and stuff.”

“Camp? Like, fun?”

“No. Not at all. They’d be put to work in the camps. And then Germany started attacking all the countries around it for more land and food and stuff. And those countries hated their Jewish people too, so they rounded them up and put them in the camps too.”

“So... like the lab?”

“Kind of, but more crowded and gross. And then... then they started killing everyone in the camps.”

“What?”

“Yeah. They’d put them in these chambers and pour in poisonous gas so they couldn’t breathe and then they died, and then they burned all their bodies. But they kept some alive to keep doing work for the war and stuff.”

You’re so shocked you can’t say anything.

“So like, I dunno, some six million Jewish people died? Yeah,” Mike mutters, looking distraught.

Your heart shatters.

“Mike...”

“My grandparents were both in camps but they didn’t get killed, they were put to work. So when America and Britain defeated Germany again, they freed all the people still alive in the camps, and my grandparents were two of them. They then moved to America and found each other here and got married, and soon after had my mom. And then Dan and then Olivia and then Emma.”

“Oh...”

“So that number was how they were kept track of in the camps.”

“Like the Lab.”

“Yup. But they don’t have psychic powers.”

You nod.

“I understand.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize this would come up. I’m an idiot,” Mike sighs.

“You’re not.”

“But –“

“You forgot. It’s probably hard to think about?” you ask.

“Yeah. Really hard. I don’t want to.”

“Okay. We should go back.”

He takes your hand and you go back into the living room, where no one seems to have noticed your absence. You find Zayde and Bubbe talking and playing with Holly in a corner.

You go up to them and hug both of them.

“Oh! To what do we owe this?” Zayde asks, smiling at you as you hug Bubbe.

“Just happy to meet you,” you murmur.

“Glad to meet you too, Jane,” Bubbe laughs, “You’re a sweet one, aren’t you?”

“The sweetest,” Zayde agrees.

“Jane, don’t bother them,” Mike says, looking panicky.

“She’s not bothering us!” Bubbe replies.

“So how did you two meet?” Zayde asks.

“Uh...” Mike stammers.

“I helped when everyone was looking for Mike’s friend Will last year,” you say quickly before Mike can say anything, “Hopper was looking after me.”

“Ah, and when did you two start dating?” Zayde continues.

Dating?

“November,” Mike says immediately, “She had to go away after that

for a year but she came back then, and... yeah.”

Bubbe beams, “Love at first sight, huh?”

“Not really,” Mike laughs, “But friends at first sight, yes.”

You smile at him and he smiles back.

“That’s the best way. Friends first,” Zayde says.

“Your zayde is my best friend,” Bubbe smiles, grabbing his arm. He snorts at him, but they both shove each other playfully.

“Jane is my best friend,” Mike says softly.

“Mike is mine,” you agree, looking over at him and taking his hand. For a minute, the only person you see is him.

“Good,” Bubbe says.

“Alright everyone, I think the soup should be about done,” Mrs. Wheeler shouts from the other end of the room, “Everyone to the dining room!”

You follow Mike, who is still holding your hand, and sit down at a large table. There are plates all over and glasses around the table, and a fancy plate in the middle. There are also books.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Mike mutters softly as you all sit down.

Most of the meal is spent talking.

Zayde tells a story – a long one, about Mike’s ancestors being slaves, and then escaping, back a long, long time ago.

You drink cups of wine, and you’re given wine for the first time in *forever*, and you like it, and Mike gets silly with you, and you try to not giggle.

And you eat flat bread that has little taste, but you don’t mind it, exactly? You feel bad for Mike, who can’t eat real bread all week,

though.

You eat lots of things you're not a huge fan of, and some gross fish, but you eat it anyway because you want to be nice.

And you sing songs, lots of songs, while you drink and talk and Zayde reads aloud the story from the book – and dribble wine on your plate, and Becca gets to ask a bunch of questions about what they were doing that are, ultimately, very helpful –

You pray prayers that you don't understand in words that are more confusing than any you've seen before...

And you sing one song that just won't get out of your head afterwards – *Die – die – eynu – Die – die – eynu* – but it's spelled Dayenu?

But as everyone finishes eating the real food, and are talking, and you talk softly with Mike, suddenly Zayde announces, "Alright, it's time for the kids to find the Afikomen! It's hidden *somewhere in this house!* Go!"

Mike grabs your hand and takes you through the house, murmuring –

"It's that matzah we broke earlier. We have to find it –"

You frown, and you close your eyes.

"Jane, that's cheating –"

You grin anyway and flit into the Void.

It's weird looking for an object instead of a person, but you find it.

"Upstairs," you whisper. Mike grins at you and you both run up the stairs, heading into his parents room. You grab the bag from underneath the bed, and you hand it to him.

"It's yours," you smile.

He shakes his head, "We found it together!"

And you bring it back to the table, happy you could do this for Mike, and make the meal fun for him.

When dinner is over, everyone starts pouring out of the house, shouting greetings and getting into cars to drive away. You stay with Mike in the basement, playing together with some of his action figures.

“When do you think you’ll go back?” Mike asks softly.

“When Hopper wants to leave,” you whisper.

He sets down the toy and looks at you, “I’m sorry I dropped all that on you today, Jane.”

“You... didn’t drop anything on me. Except some matzah crumbs.”

“No, no, not that – um – telling you all that stuff. About the Holocaust. And my grandparents. It was a lot for you to learn so quickly.”

You frown.

“I’m sorry Mike.”

“Why are... you sorry?”

“Because that’s horrible.”

“Oh.”

“I want to kill Hitler.”

Mike snorts, “Well, he’s dead, so...”

“I want to go back in time and kill him first.”

“If only,” Mike laughs.

“And every person who did that to your family.”

Mike looks like he’s going to cry.

“Thanks, Jane.”

“I just... can’t believe you almost didn’t exist,” Jane whispers.

“Neither can I,” Mike admits.

You wrap your arms around him and hug him tightly, as tightly as you can, to make sure he stays *here*.

You hear shouting upstairs.

Mike groans.

“Almost got through the day...”

You get up and walk to the stairs, peering up from the basement.

“I don’t care, Ted! I don’t care!”

You look back at Mike, who’s balled up inside the fort, not looking in your direction.

“You have to be engaged! This is the one holiday a year I ask you to participate! I just ask you to be present!”

“It’s the same damn thing every year –“

“I don’t care! It’s one night a year!”

“One night with loads of wine, boring stories, and a song that gets stuck in your head –“

“Theodore.”

“Maybe Jane and I should go...”

Oh no.

Hopper, no –

“Perhaps, yes,” Mike’s mother sighs.

You look over at Mike, who manages to get up and walk to you.

"I'll be okay," he mutters, but he doesn't look it.

"Mike –" you whisper, tears in your eyes. But Hopper's downstairs, and you have to hug Mike goodbye, and before you know it you're leaving.

You wish there was more you could do.

"Hopper?" you whisper as you drive, silently, back to the cabin.

"Yeah?"

"Why are Mike's parents so mean to each other?"

Hopper sighs.

"I don't know, kid."

"Yes, you do," you mutter.

Hopper remains silent.

"it's not because of how long they've been together. His grandparents have been together forever and they're just as in love as me and Mike."

Hopper doesn't say anything, just keeps driving.

"Please tell me."

"You really want to know, kid?"

"Yeah."

"You can't fix it, if that's what you're thinking."

"I know."

Hopper sighs.

"Mike's mom married Mike's dad because she wanted kids. She wanted to be a mom and a wife and stay at home and take care of a house. She didn't want to go to college or anything else. So she got

married to a man she didn't know very well, just to get married."

"Oh."

"And then they both became unhappy because they never really loved each other."

"Oh..."

"And now it's starting to explode, because you can't live a lie like that forever. So, they fight. Because they aren't meant for each other."

"Will they break up?"

Hopper frowns.

"I don't know, kid. I really don't know."

"What will happen to Mike if they do?"

"He'll probably stay with his mom. Same with Nancy and Holly. But it'll be a lot different for them."

"Yeah," you whisper.

He pulls up to the cabin, you wondering why *this* had to happen to Mike, too.

A P R I L 27 1985

"Surprise!"

You wake up in shock to see Mike looking down at you, standing next to your bed. His hair is so curly it bounces as he stands there.

"M... Mike?" you ask groggily.

"Happy Birthday!"

You sit up and rub your eyes, "What... is happening?"

"Hopper woke up early and grabbed me right away! Thanks for

getting me out of Shabbat service. I'm too tired to go today."

You frown at him, "But you like going."

"Yeah and I like you more. It's your birthday! This is much more important. We're the same age again!"

You smile at him, "Where is Hopper?"

"Out. I don't know what he's doing. But he said he'll be back soon!"

You nod and get out of the covers, stretching and yawning more. Mike smiles at you, one of the happiest faces you've seen on his face in a while.

His dad really won't stop yelling at him.

And he keeps getting into trouble at school.

And that makes his dad yell more.

And that makes him hurt himself more.

You shake your head to try and clear it.

It's your birthday.

You don't have to think about that today.

"Hopper brought back a treat for your breakfast! And I started cooking it," Mike looks at his watch, "Oh shit –"

He runs out of the room before you can even say anything. You follow him groggily into the kitchen as he pulls something out of the old oven, setting it on the counter.

"What is it?" you ask.

"You'll have to wait!"

You pout and sit at the table. He frowns.

"Oh don't do that."

“Don’t do what?”

“Make that face –“

“It’s my face!”

“I can’t say no to that face!”

“Then don’t say no!”

You’re both giggling.

“You’re *ridiculous*,” Mike snorts.

“You’re ridiculous,” you say, and he comes over and kisses you softly. You blush furiously.

“That’s one,” he says, grinning.

“One... kiss?” you ask.

“Yeah. I’m going to kiss you at *least* fourteen times today.”

You blush even more as he goes back to the tray he pulled out of the oven. He then uncovers, does something with it you can’t see, and brings it over.

You gasp.

“Cinnamon rolls!”

“Yup,” Mike grins.

You look up at him, “*Cinnamon rolls*.”

“Yup,” Mike repeats, smiling even wider.

You eagerly grab a fork from him and start digging in, him eating the other side of it as you just munch in happy silence together, taking moments to smile at each other once in a while.

When you’ve finished you get up and walk over to hug Mike, and he laughs.

“It’s just cinnamon rolls –“

“*Tasty* cinnamon rolls!”

“You’re welcome then.”

You kiss him on the cheek and then run into your room to change, staring into your small mirror and putting on your favorite punk makeup, because it’s your birthday and you can waste a little of it. When you leave the room and walk back out to Mike, his mouth is partially open.

“What?” you ask nervously, “Is there something wrong?”

“No, just... I haven’t seen you in that skirt before,” he admits. It’s bright red and flares out and goes down to your knees.

“It’s nice,” he says, stumbling over his words. You smile at him and blush.

“Thank you.”

“Um. Right. I dunno when Hopper will be back but what do you want to do until he is?” Mike asks.

“We could read another book?” you murmur. Mike nods and pulls a book out of his bag – *The Outsiders*.

This book isn’t as hard as others you’ve read, and you work together with Mike, leaning into his arms as he holds the book out in front of you both. You’re kind of sitting close to his lap, and you just feel so nice and safe that you don’t want to leave.

The door opens and you just stay put, but Mike jumps a little.

“Alright – Happy Birthday Jane!” Hopper cheers, walking in and beaming. Mike has separated himself from you and you frown at him.

“What happened this time?” Hopper asks immediately, his face falling.

“Nothing!” Mike says quickly.

“Oh... kay then. Anyways. Happy Birthday!”

You jump up and hug him, smiling at him, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, kid. Are you ready for your present?”

You open your eyes wide and nod eagerly.

“Okay, few things first: I hope you like them, and this is all contingent on you being *responsible*. I can’t be around to take care of them, you’re going to have to do the grunt work.”

“Wait, take care of what?” Mike asks in confusion.

Hopper grins, and then turns to the porch, wheeling in a cage about as tall as you. Inside of it are two birds.

You gasp loudly.

“Really?” you squeal.

“Yes, really,” Hopper snorts.

One of the birds is grey with orange cheeks and a grey crest, the other is completely white with a yellow head and crest and orange cheeks. They’re both peeping and chirping at each other.

“Got a pal who’s been raising these two since they were chicks but has to move to a new town and doesn’t have the space for them,” Hopper explains, “They’re cockatiels, little parrots.”

You are so excited –

Their beaks look like they’re *smiling*!

“Woah, what are their names?” Mike asks next to you.

“This one is Eddie,” he introduces, taking it out of the cage and handing it to you. Eddie is the grey-bodied one, and he steps up onto your finger. Your eyes widen as you look down at him.

“And the other one is Chester,” Hopper continues, pulling him out and putting him on your other finger.

You are so shocked by this development you can't say anything.

They're so *fluffy*!

Chester chirps and immediately crawls up from your finger to sit on your shoulder. Eddie stays put, reaching up with his foot to scratch behind his ear.

"They're two years old and they were reared by him, so they're fairly used to people," Hopper explains, "I wanted to get you ones that you wouldn't have to tame because talk about a nightmare."

Eddie suddenly bows his head on your finger.

"Oh right – uh – Greg said that that means he wants you to scratch behind his head. Just rub it with your finger," Hopper says. You reach out and do so, and Eddie scrunches up his eyes.

"That means he's happy," Hopper says.

You love them instantly.

"I thought Jane wanted a dog?" Mike says.

"Dogs need walks. These birds can just stay inside the house. And since Jane is home all the time she can clean the cage, and replace their food, and wash their bowls, and take them out sometimes."

"What's in the cage?" Mike asks, as you are far too busy scratching Eddie's head.

"Toys. They need lots of them apparently. I don't really know what I'm doing I just mentioned to Greg at lunch that I was trying to get a new pet and he pawned them off on me."

You walk back with them to the couch, but Chester flies off your shoulder, making you shout in surprise.

Chester lands on top of Hopper's head.

Mike bursts out laughing.

"I fee like I should have seen this coming," Hopper grumbles, "Kid, just make sure the door's closed when you take them out."

You nod and keep scratching Eddie's head.

"You realize she's not going to talk to anyone for the rest of the day, right?" Mike snorts.

"I do now, yes," Hopper sighs.

"Need help moving the cage in?"

"Yeah, thanks kid."

You let Eddie walk up to your shoulder, and he starts wandering around your back. You giggle as it tickles your lower neck.

"Okay, Jane, we should let them get used to this place, let's put him back in the cage –" Hopper says. You look up to see he doesn't have Chester on his head anymore; Chester is also in the cage.

You glare at him.

"*Kid.*"

You sigh, step up, and go put Eddie back in the cage. He immediately scrambles to a food bowl, and seeds go everywhere when he sits in it.

"Ah!" you shout as some land on your foot.

"Please try to keep it clean in here," Hopper groans.

"This is going to be a disaster," Mike laughs.

"*You* be quiet."

"What did you think would happen?"

"I thought birds – easy pets – not as hard as cats or dogs!"

"Birds aren't easy pets!"

"Well I'm quickly figuring that out!"

“Shh,” you say, because Chester is singing and you want to listen.

Eddie hops from a perch and onto the side of the cage where you are, looking at you expectantly. You don’t open the cage door because you know Hopper will tell you to put him back.

“Well kid, it was nice having you around.”

“What now?”

“She’s clearly too focused on the birds to have a boyfriend.”

“*Hey!*”

“I can do both,” you say softly, just watching Eddie crawl around.

He wants to come out and hang out with you.

Or he just wants to come out.

Either way, he doesn’t see you as weird.

He just sees you as you.

Notes for the Chapter:

The original version of the cockatiel plot was going to involve Hopper not have ANY idea what he was doing and the birds starting out with a small cage and no toys and Jane just figuring it out and fighting with Hopper over it... and then I changed my mind because frankly I'm going to put these characters through enough as it is

So, caveat: do not get someone a pet without thorough research. Make sure that they are ready for that responsibility and commitment. There is no such thing as a "low maintenance" pet and birds are especially high maintenance because of their unique physiology and high intelligence. Please, please, please, PLEASE don't do what Hopper did even though it'll work out for them because I'm too nice of

an author sometimes.

Anyways I own two tiels (AND, FOR THE RECORD, I RESEARCHED HOW TO CARE FOR COCKATIELS FOR AN ENTIRE YEAR AND A HALF BEFORE GETTING THEM) who were this friendly at the start so is it unlikely? Yes. Do I care? no. Also my fluffy dinosaurs say hello to you all. Yes I call them dinosaurs. They are. You can google it.

I didn't even plan for there to be this big moment of seeing herself in these two older people (zayde and bubbe) for Jane and the grandparents I just... realized it as I wrote... I love it when this happens.

Does Mike have ADHD? Yes

Am I really going to go into it? Probably???? I have adhd too so... probably. IDK. I'm juggling ten other plot bunnies in the air while a small angry dinosaur screams on my head that she's moulting and itchy

Uh let's see what else... oh right the carnival was for Purim. Jane wouldn't have any fucking clue how that's spelled so... yeah.

Thank you all for the wonderful wonderful comments. Seriously each time I get one I just, tear the fuck up. This is so amazing and I'm glad you all love the story so much!!! You all are the best and reminder if you want to interact with me more I have a tumblr: Ornithoscelida . Please keep the comments coming :) :) :) :) :)

15. A Torture Chamber All Your Own

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Dissociative Thoughts, Self-Harm, Bullying, Underage Smoking, Suicidal Thoughts, Depressive Thought Spirals, I guess? Deliberate self-starvation? (does not having the best motivations for religious fasting count Idk)... the whole shebang really

JUNE 8 1985

MIKE WHEELER

You don't feel like you inhabit your body.

You feel like your mind and your body are on separate planes of existence as you walk up to the front door of the cabin and knock on it.

Your mind is somewhere dark and your body is back on the normal planet.

Knocking on the door makes the small birdy screams start.

You hear footsteps run up to the door and its wrenched open.

Jane looks at you with a frown.

"Mike? Mike what is it –"

"I'm going away," you said, your voice monotone.

You don't know where your mind is but it isn't here.

"Wh – what?" Jane asks, tears coming to her eyes and spilling over, smudging her makeup.

"My dad is sending me away. For the summer. To camp," you still have the monotone voice.

Jane moves aside and lets you come into the cabin, closing the door behind you.

“Camp?” she asks softly. You sit down, staring in front of you, not saying anything.

“Mike? What’s camp.”

“It’s a place out in some sort of woods or park or something and I’ll have to live in a cabin like this but with a bunch of boys I don’t know and they’ll do ‘character building’ exercises which basically means that they’re going to be disciplining me the whole time,” you say quickly, just staring out in front of you still.

“Why are you going?”

“My dad is sending me. He thinks I need ‘discipline’ but doesn’t want to spend money on a special school for it. Which, really, means he’s sick of having me around, and he doesn’t want to be bothered with me for a summer, and would *like* to not be bothered with me ever again.”

Everything inside of you is clenched too too tightly.

“Mike...”

“My dad doesn’t want me around. My dad doesn’t want to deal with me,” you whisper.

“I’m sorry, Mike.”

“My dad hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you, Mike.”

“Yeah, he kinda does.”

“Okay, maybe... yeah.”

The birds are screaming still. And one of them is moulting, so the fluff all over the cabin is getting ridiculous.

You don't really care.

Except for the coughing, but whatever.

"I hate him."

"You should."

"But I don't want my parents to get divorced."

"Divorced?"

"It's when married people break up."

"Married?"

You're too tired and too... disconnected from yourself for her questions today.

But you don't want to hurt her.

You're connected enough to yourself for that.

"When two people promise to be together forever, like boyfriend and girlfriend together, forever, and go through life together and spend the rest of their lives helping each other and being together. You've seen that on TV or in books, right?"

"Yeah, I just kept forgetting to look it up. And I like it when you explain things to me."

You sit there in silence for a long time.

"Why don't you want them to get divorced?"

"Because it'll be my fault."

"Mike..."

"I'll be the kid who made them divorce. That's who I'll be, forever. That kid. The one who fucked everything up because he couldn't *keep his FUCKING SELF TOGETHER*," you scream, getting up and kicking the coffee table.

Jane watches you with wide eyes as you keep kicking it.

"I'm – such – a –piece – of – worthless –" you shout, continuing to kick it as tears fall out of your eyes, hot and wet against your cheek. The birds scream, startled in their cage.

"Mike –"

"I'm awful I'm terrible I'm the reason they're going to divorce –"

"Mike –"

"Why is this happening? Why is this happening to me –"

"Mike!"

You stop kicking and crying and turn to look at Jane. She's watching you from the couch.

"You're not the reason they're going to divorce," she murmurs.

"What?"

"They weren't in love, Mike."

You're still disconnected from yourself that you barely really register her words.

"They – what?"

"They weren't in love," Jane repeats, "You should get married to someone you love and they weren't."

The words are true and they hurt.

They hurt so, so much.

You fall down to the floor and start crying, holding your face in your hands. Jane gets off the couch and holds you, wrapping her arms around you tightly.

"I'm sorry, Mike."

You sniffle more.

“Why doesn’t my dad want me?”

“I don’t know.”

You hold your face in your hands and cry more and more.

“How long does camp go for?”

“Starts the 17th and goes until August 2nd.”

“So one and a half months.”

“Yeah.”

You look up at her and she looks at you, frowning.

“Can you get through it?”

“I don’t know,” you mutter.

“I’ll try to visit but it’s going to be hard because you’re farther away,” Jane mumbles.

“Yeah,” and your voice breaks.

“Should you run away and stay here?” Jane asks.

You laugh weakly.

“They’d find out.”

Jane holds on tighter to you and squeezes.

“Please don’t go,” she whispers.

“I have to...”

“If you go I won’t...”

“You’ll have Dustin and Lucas and Will and Max.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll have no one.”

She makes a sobbing sound and hugs you tighter. You both sit there and cry, for a long time, even though you know you should go back home soon.

“Mike?”

You pull away and look at her.

She grabs your hands and holds them tightly.

“What... are you doing,” you frown.

You still are dissociated from yourself so it feels like everything is happening to someone else.

“I promise,” she says softly.

“You... promise what?” you ask, raising an eyebrow.

“I want to stick with you forever and help you forever and all that other stuff,” she repeats.

“Wh... *what?*”

“That married thing. I promise. We’re married now.”

This is so ridiculous you burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Jane, we’re not married now.”

“Why not?”

She looks grumpy.

“Well, to begin with, I have to promise too. And then we have to have someone like, *say* we’re married. An official guy. And we have to sign a bunch of things for the government, which we can’t do

because you are still hiding from them. And we also have to be adults, we're only fourteen," you manage to say while laughing, now so distracted from your pain that you feel like you're two separate people in that moment.

She frowns even more, "That's stupid."

"Why is it stupid?"

"Why should we need all of that? Besides you promising too."

"Because... a big part of it is the government knowing you're married."

"Why?"

"I don't know," you admit.

"Why do we need to be adults?"

"Because it's a big decision."

"I've made big decisions."

"I... true," you admit.

"Why can't I make this one?" Jane demands.

"Because... because grown-ups are stupid," you say softly.

"Okay," Jane pauses, "Then we're married without them."

"I never promised back," you say, and now you're so confused and shocked by what's happening you've separated into three different people –

The Mike who is Crushinglly Sad and Lost

The Mike who is Confused and Overwhelmed

The Mike who is Happy and so Ridiculously in Love with this weird girl –

“Well, why don’t you?” Jane asks.

“Because... of all those things I just said,” you admit, “It’s... not something kids do.”

“Well it’s something *this* kid does.”

You laugh again.

“Are you sure? Forever? Forever is a long time,” you say.

Lost

Overwhelmed

Happy

“Yes, I’m sure,” Jane says firmly.

Sad

Confused

In Love

But she has a point.

She has a *very* good point.

Are you really going to break up with her, ever?

“Okay,” you hold her hands, “I promise too.”

This is the weirdest thing you’ve ever –

Okay not the weirdest.

But it’s up there.

It’s very very very up there.

“We shouldn’t tell our friends though,” you say softly.

“Why?”

“Because... they’ll think it’s really weird and stupid. And I don’t want it to be ruined.”

“Okay,” Jane nods, “Makes sense.”

You smile weakly at her.

So weird.

You love this weird weird girl.

Jane smiles and nods at you, “And that’s how you’ll get through camp.”

You laugh, before crying again. And you just hold onto each other until you can’t cry anymore.

J U N E 1 8 1 9 8 5

“Hey Jane,” you mutter quietly, looking up at the ceiling of your cabin.

The other boys are out playing baseball or something but you decided to stay inside where you could be alone for at least a few seconds.

“I know you aren’t listening to me... probably... because you’d say hello back. And I’m too far away for you to visit, really,” you continue, “At least for any length of time.”

It’s hot in this stupid cabin and you miss playing Dungeons and Dragons with your friends, or helping Jane read in the cabin, or making homemade popsicles with Nancy.

“But only sixty-three days left to go. I know I should change the countdown to when I get out of here, but... we’ve been counting down to the first day of school for so long it feels wrong to change it, you know?”

You let out a long sigh.

“The worst part of this is that you can’t write, because you’re still hiding. I can get letters from everyone else but I can’t get one from you. It’s just stupid.”

You feel so lonely it’s like your chest is crushing in on itself.

Your stomach feels much much much too tight.

You start crying and you hold your face in your hands.

“I hate everything about this place and it’s only day one.”

You sniffle and sit up, staring in front of you.

“it’s boring. All the things to do are sports. And like, other things I don’t care about. And the boys are mean. And the counselors are mean. And I just... miss you so much.”

You let in a shaking breath and try to hold it together.

But you can’t.

“I miss you. And I miss Nancy. And I miss Dustin, and Lucas, and Will. And I miss Max. And I miss Steve and Jonathan and Hopper and Mrs. Byers. And I even miss my mom a little. And I miss Zayde and Bubbe. And I miss Holly. And I miss just being at home with my things. And I miss your crazy stupid birds. And I miss everything. I don’t want to be here.”

You can’t stop crying.

“I don’t want to be here. I don’t know why my dad sent me here. I don’t want to be here.”

You press your face into your knees.

“I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here.”

You keep crying and hold your face tightly against your knees, so that you’re as compact into this ball shape as you can be.

You just want to make yourself small.

You don't really want to exist anymore.

You haven't for a while.

You can pretend you do when you're with Jane, or your friends, and happy.

But those always ebb away back to not wanting to exist again.

"I miss you, Jane. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you."

You can't stop saying it, you just rock back and forth and mumble it to your knees.

"I didn't want to say that ever again, Jane. We had a whole year of this. Worse, because I didn't know if you were alive, but a whole year. And now I'm separated from you again. I hate this. I hate this. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you."

You miss her.

J U N E 2 2 1 9 8 5

"Care to explain what this is, Camper Wheeler?"

You look up and glare at the Counselor.

You don't bother to learn any of their names.

"It's my razor blade."

You've gone back to cutting only your thighs.

Your wrists are too exposed in this heat.

"You don't have a beard."

"No, but I have it with me in case a miracle happens over the summer."

Some other campers snicker at that, but most everyone stays silent.

“Sharp objects are not allowed in the camp.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” you ask dully.

You can always find another way.

You’re innovative like that.

“Well we will obviously have to confiscate this blade,” the counselor says, “And then I believe you should be ordered to run laps around the camp.”

“How many?”

“Oh, until you get tired.”

You frown and go, “No.”

Everyone is completely silent.

“No?”

“No.”

“Are you disobeying a direct order?”

“Yeah, I am,” you say quietly.

You don’t give a fuck anymore.

They can do what they want to you.

You just don’t care.

“Fifty push ups!”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“That’s it, you’re being sent to the head counselor’s office.”

You shrug, and walk there willingly, kicking up rocks as you go.

You just.

You don’t care.

And you get yelled at, and screamed at, and it goes on for hours and hours, and they’re going to call your parents, and you’re on thin ice and having privileges revoked, and blah-blah-blah.

You don’t care.

J U N E 3 0 1 9 8 5

“Hey Wheeler, want to go hiking with us?”

The woods remind you of Will getting lost and Jane being found and you searching for Jane every now and then during last year.

You sigh.

“No, thanks though.”

The other boys shrug and leave without you, and you can hear their muttering as they go –

“What a weirdo.”

“He never does anything.”

“Did you hear him talk back to Counselor Yates the other day?”

“Bet he was going to use that blade to hurt everyone in the camp.”

“Yeah! I bet he’s one step away from snapping.”

“No wonder he doesn’t have any friends.”

You listen to them leave and walk back to your bunk, going up into it and pressing your face into the mattress.

You hadn't gotten any letters yet.

And you know that your friends are busy – Lucas is doing a space camp thing, Dustin's volunteering at an animal shelter, Will is doing some sort of art-therapy thing, Max is back in California with her dad, and Jane cannot, of course, write.

But Nancy hasn't even written you and she is just doing college prep stuff at home.

So maybe you don't have any friends.

Maybe the only friend you have is Jane and –

No.

No.

Stop thinking like that.

You have lots of friends.

They're all just busy.

And they don't *know* this is going as badly as it can.

They don't know anything.

It's not like you've written them either.

You quickly pull out your paper and pen and write as many letters as you can.

You need to hear from them just to get through this mess.

And maybe they can tell you how Jane is doing.

J U L Y 4 1 9 8 5

“Happy Independence Day!”

“Happy Fourth!”

“Let’s go set off some fireworks!”

“Yeah!”

Everyone’s laughing and talking. One of the other boys comes up to you as you watch everything from the cabin, standing outside of it and leaning against the wall.

You managed to steal some cigarettes and a lighter from one of the counselors, since you still haven’t found something good to hurt yourself with.

So you started to smoke them, and since the counselors were all in a meeting, you were taking the opportunity to do it now.

“What?” you ask gruffly as the boy walks up to you. He’s slightly younger than you, and looks nervous.

“Um... do you want to come play with us all?”

“No thanks,” you mutter.

You don’t want them to just make fun of you.

“Don’t you like the fourth?”

“Not really.”

“Why not?”

You drop the cigarette on the ground and smash it with your foot, covering it with gravel.

“America fucking sucks and the sooner you realize that the better.”

The boy’s eyes widen.

“Are you a communist?”

“No, I’m a person who America fucked over. See ya,” you say angrily, walking away and through the woods.

Yeah, it reminds you of shitty stuff, but at least it reminds you of

home.

And you don't have to listen to these idiots praising your shithole of a country.

A country that enslaved countless people and killed the people who originally lived in it.

A country that did scientific testing on young kids and then fucking killed anyone who tried to help them.

Fucking shithole.

You walk to a clearing near the camp and sit down on a rock, smoking another cigarette and just staring out into the sky.

J U L Y 7 1 9 8 5

These letters are a lifeline.

Dear Mike,

Enclosed is a letter from Jane. Don't worry, I didn't read it. I'm glad you liked my idea of me sending you her letters. I know you need them. I've been doing okay. As you know things have been better for me since Barb's funeral. Jonathan and I are doing well. He's nervous about college applications next year. I've talked to Steve some, too. He's... nervous because he's training to be a police officer. Things are still kind of awkward but I'm dealing with it. Mom and Dad are still fighting, but now it's not about you, so I hope that helps.

*Love,
Nancy*

It does help, if only a little bit. Mostly it just hurts that you being gone doesn't make things better.

Dear Mike,

I love you. I visit you sometimes but I can't say much. I'm glad you heard me that one time though. I love you. I'm bad at writing. I hope you can read this. I love you. I've been practicing more and more though. I'm

scared of school. I hope I do well. Hopper thinks I can do this and I believe him. I love you. Eddie and Chester are doing well. They've finally stopped moulting and the cabin is clean again, and they are flying all around. I love you. Please don't hurt yourself too bad.

*Love,
Jane*

Each I love you is like a stab to the heart, but it reminds you that you have her, still, and she's alive and this isn't like last year at all.

If only you could remember that for long enough to not start to flash back –

And panic –

And feel like you were in the past again...

Dear Mike,

Space camp is the best. I wish your dad had sent you to this with me! I miss Max and everyone but man I've made a lot of friends. They like DND and Star Wars too. And we can do things like pretend to be astronauts and learn about going into space! You know, I hope one day I can go into space. That would be neat. And better than, like, fighting Demogorgons. I've been thinking about what I want us to do when we all get back and I think we should have a really long campaign. You in?

~ Lucas

You are painfully jealous of Lucas.

Dear Mike,

Hope you're doing okay! I'm really bad at writing letters but I love art therapy. I'm supposed to just draw things that reflect my moods and to let out my pent up emotions about stuff. So I've included some drawings I've done just for you! They're of some of the scary stuff we saw last year but I think you'll still like them. Oh! Jonathan says hi. He's doing work so he'll have some money saved up for college. Mom's really hoping he'll get to go to NYU! Man next year's going to be hard. Well at least there won't be any monsters!

~ Will

You wish you could believe Will.

But the fall approaches ever faster and with it reminders of the past two years.

Of Will being lost.

Of Demogorgons.

Of trying to keep Jane safe.

Of Will having now-memories.

Of giant tunnels.

Of Demo-dogs.

Of Bob buying.

You're reminded to say a single mourner's Kaddish and you do so quickly.

Dear Mike,

Okay so important: animals are the best but what is the best GROUP of animals? I personally think its reptiles. No one else agrees with me and it's a BUMMER. But! This means that whenever someone drops off a reptile to the animal shelter I GET TO TAKE CARE OF IT! No one else wants to! Ha! They're all fighting over the dogs and the cats and I GET TO HAVE THE SNAKE ALL TO MYSELF! His name is Percival. That's such a great snake name it's fantastic. Steve is super nervous about training he talks to me about it all the time. He's getting better at it though and he passes all of his practice tests! I can't wait for him to work with Chief.

~ Dustin

You can practically hear Dustin's excitement, even from all the way over here.

Dear Mike,

California fucking sucks. I thought I liked it better but I guess I don't. I like having friends more. Sorry things suck for you as much as they suck for me. Summer won't last forever though.

~ Max

That letter is so Max it's practically comedic.

You write replies back to everyone and reach into your bag. You finally managed to grab a counselor's razor the other day and you quickly go to work on your thighs, before bandaging them up.

You then go outside and smoke, watching as other campers are all talking by a campfire. You know you can't be seen where you are, hidden amongst the trees.

You don't even really care if something, like a bear, could catch you.

You'd probably just let it.

J U L Y 1 1 1 9 8 5

"Ha ha! Ha! I've got Wheeler's le-tters!"

"Give them back!" you shout.

"Look, this one's from his *giiiiirlfriend*," another camper teases, holding up Jane's two letters to you and laughing. Everyone laughs with him.

"Bet she's even weirder than he is!"

"Give them *back*!"

"Is your girlfriend some sort of goth chick?"

"Oh oh! I bet she's a murderer or something!"

"She totally wears only black clothing right?"

"I bet you just made her up! You probably have one of your nerdy friends write as her so you can seem cool."

“Give me back my letters!” you scream.

“What are you going to do?” an older camper asks, looking down at you. He’s big and burly and reminds you of how much High School is going to fucking *suck*.

“You don’t want to know, just fucking give them back,” you hiss.

The camper grins, and then starts to tear one of the letters. You scream again and dive at him, knocking him to the ground.

“Ow!”

You wrench the paper from his hands and stuff them into your pockets. You then tackle the other boys and grab the papers from them, too.

“What is going on here?”

You wheel around on your heels to see a Counselor walk up to you all.

“Wheeler just tackled me, sir,” the other camper says.

“Oh did he?” the Counselor asks, glaring at you.

“They stole my letters,” you mutter quietly.

“What letters?” the Counselor demands.

You pat your pocket, because you don’t want to lose them.

“He’s lying. Those are my letters,” the camper says.

“No! They’re for me,” you snap.

“Oh yeah? Prove it,” the camper laughs.

“They’re addressed to Mike –“

“I’m Mike.”

You feel your heart clench in your chest.

Fuck your parents for giving you a common name.

“They’re from my girlfriend Jane –“

Everyone bursts into laughter.

“Kid, do you *really* think I believe you right now?” the Counselor asks.

You reluctantly pull out the letters and show them to him. The counselor reads them over and frowns.

“Seems these are for Wheeler.”

You breathe with relief.

“But clearly they’re causing problems.”

Your heart clenches tightly.

“If everyone is going to be fighting and causing a ruckus over these letters then I have no choice but to destroy them –“

“NO!” you scream, and you tackle the counselor now too, ripping them from his hands and backing away.

Everyone looks at you like you’re a wild animal.

Is this what Jane feels like all the time?

Shit you’re going to give her all the hugs.

“Wheeler,” the counselor pants, “You’re in big trouble now.”

You follow him, but he doesn’t go to the head. He goes to your cabin and starts going through your belongings.

“Wait, what are you doing –“

“Aha!”

The counselor pulls out your cigarettes, lighter, and razor.

“We’ve been acting accordingly when we have ‘special case’ boys. Watching you, seeing how you interact with the other campers, how you lash out at the counselors. But you have shown no improvement.”

You shrug.

“You seem to have no respect for authority.”

“Well, authority doesn’t respect me.”

Parker glares at you more.

“Young man, I think you should spend some time in isolation to think about your attitude.”

You shrug.

Whatever.

You’re isolated anyway.

The counselor throws you into a room and you sit there, staring at the wall across from you.

In the beginning you revel in not having to talk to anyone or deal with anyone else.

But soon you really want a smoke.

And soon after that you really want to cut yourself.

And soon after that you’re trapped in your own thoughts again.

Trapped trapped trapped trapped –

You are awful.

No one wants you around.

You’ll never be able to relate to other people.

Because of the Upside Down.

And everything that happened.

You're always going to be weird and angry and unapproachable.

And no one will ever want to become your friend.

And eventually your friends will all leave you because they'll be able to move on.

But you won't be.

You'll never be.

Maybe Jane won't move on but what kind of person are you to drag her into your shit of a life?

It isn't fair to her.

She deserves to be happy.

You can never be happy.

You're going to feel this way forever.

You're useless.

And terrible.

And awful.

And you should die.

Cutting yourself isn't enough of a punishment.

You should just be dead.

Dead dead dead.

Couldn't save Will – Jane did that.

Couldn't save Jane – Hopper did that.

Couldn't save anyone.

Nope.

Awful.

Awful.

Awful.

Awful...

J U L Y 28 1985

You've never fasted on Tisha B'Av before.

It was a thing grownups do, and you consider yourself to be a kid, still, even after you became a Bar Mitzvah.

But you figure, camp food sucks ass anyway, and you don't have many other ways to hurt yourself anymore now that they took away the cigarettes and your razor.

So you sit in your cabin and you don't eat.

No one talks to you. No one approaches you.

Everyone thinks you're dangerous because you punched out another camper again and pretty much everyone is avoiding you so you don't "snap" and kill everyone.

Not that you actually would.

And you hate yourself so much for reaching this point that it's time to fast.

It's time to think about how your people are doomed to suffering.

Doomed to losing the temple, *twice*.

Doomed to exile.

Doomed to persecution.

Doomed to death.

Doomed.

And so are you.

You know that this is wrong, logically. You know you'll be okay when you get out of this camp, and even though terrible things happen, you've always been able to get through them – with your friends, with your sister, and of course with Jane.

But it's hard to make that stupid spiral shut up.

And honestly, the longer you're on your own, the harder and harder it is.

So you sit.

And you fast.

And you stare out the window.

And you wish you could go back in time.

Notes for the Chapter:

Woouoooooo! This was super duper dark! Yay!

Shout out to ImberReader for helping me come up with like, half the ideas for this chapter or something because I knew what had to happen but I didn't know how to pad the wording

Also! shout out to ImberReader for like, totally encouraging that first scene (the married one) to happen.

Me: I have the chance and opportunity to include a RIDICULOUSLY CHEESE scene in the next chapter. Do I do it. Like this is fondue level cheesy.

ImberReader: your cheese is the best cheese tho you know ill say yes

Me: but this is cheesier than anything I've ever attempted

ImberReader: well then up that mark

Me: OK, challenge fucking accepted

so basically I'm saying blame ImberReader for like most of this chapter

Anyways if you're wondering "wow, that got fucking dark" just wait because we're in for a Fun Ride called High School

Thanks y'all for the lovely and amazing comments, and keep 'em coming :D :D :D :D you are all amazing and I love talking with you about the story!

16. Here We Go

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for implications of self-harm and underage smoking

AUGUST 18 1985

JANE HOPPER

You almost don't know who the boy who came back from camp is.

He looks like Mike. In some ways he acts like Mike. And you know he is Mike.

But he isn't Mike.

He's a shell of Mike, a broken thing, a lost thing.

He isn't Mike.

"I don't know what to do," you mutter quietly to Dustin as the two of you play with Eddie and Chester. Dustin is scratching Chester on the back of his head, and Eddie is standing on top of yours and singing.

"Neither do I. Fuck his fucking shithead of a father," Dustin grumbles in annoyance. You nod in agreement.

"I can kill him."

"Jane what have we talked about?"

You sigh, "Murder isn't okay."

"There we go."

You pull Eddie off of your head and look at him.

"Thank you, by the way."

"For what?"

“Being here this summer.”

“Yeah. I’m glad I stayed in Hawkins,” Dusting frowns.

“Mike was *supposed* to...”

“Well still. I’m glad I did. And Lucas and Will and Max are back now, too, and they aren’t traumatized.”

“Yeah,” you mutter quietly. Dustin puts Chester on his shoulder and wraps his arms around you in a hug.

“It’ll be okay.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, but it’s all I can say.”

You nod and wipe tears out of your eyes.

“Thanks Dustin,” you mumble.

“Yeah, of course,” Dustin pauses, frowning, “Are *you* okay?”

“What?”

“With Mike coming back as the evil version of himself literally no one’s been checking up on you.”

“Mike has.”

“Okay, he doesn’t fucking count.”

“It’s one of the few times he seems like himself,” you mutter quietly. Dustin sighs again, not meeting your eyes.

“Fine. Has anyone *else* checked up on you?”

“Not really,” you mumble.

“So, how are you?”

“Scared.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“You are?”

Dustin shrugs, “High School is different. We’re not kids anymore.”

You frown, “But I am a kid.”

“Okay, this is going to be one of those really stupid societal things you question all the time and I have to explain in painstaking detail. Are you ready?”

You laugh, “Yes.”

“Awesome, okay. So yeah we aren’t adults until we’re eighteen.”

“Right.”

“*But* by the time we’re in high school – so like, fourteen and stuff – people expect us to *act* more like adults.”

“Why?”

“Because honestly eighteen is a date they just picked arbitrarily cause it’s when school ends. But high school is more serious than other schools. And like, we’re supposed to have different interests, like not playing with toys.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Oh I agree, but people go along with it anyway. And we have to start making adult decisions.”

“What are those?”

“Like, what we want to do with our lives, and where we want to go to college, and that kind of thing. Even if we want to go to college.”

“So we start... now?”

“No, people usually give the first two years for us to adjust. We also grow up more.”

“Like, taller?”

Dustin laughs, “Yeah, sure. Taller. And other stuff. We look more like adults.”

You nod and frown.

“But we’re still kids?”

“Yeah. They give us this buffer time to figure out how to be adults before they start like, giving us adult consequences for what we do.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Except sometimes there still are adult consequences, and like, people get mad at you if you don’t act like an adult. It’s weird and stupid and I wish I could explain it better but honestly I just don’t think there is a good explanation.”

You let out a heavy sigh.

“Society is stupid.”

“Agreed.”

You press your fists together briefly.

“But don’t worry,” Dustin pauses, “You’re smart and strong. You’ll be fine in High School.”

“Will I?” you mutter.

“Yeah! And when you don’t know how to be a human being,” Dustin grins, making you stick your tongue out at him, “We all can help you figure it out.”

You sigh again, “Thanks.”

You just wish you didn’t have to worry about Mike on top of it.

AUGUST 19 1985

Waking up this early *sucks*.

You are so grumpy you feel like you're going to wreak havoc on the cabin if you're not careful.

"Jane, please, just, eat some food," Hopper groans. You grunt at him.

"Jane, I need you to wake up, it's your first day –"

"No."

"Jane, you're fourteen, I'm not letting you get addicted to coffee."

"I want to go back to bed."

"Please try to wake up."

You're also super nervous and your stomach is churning, so you don't really want to eat anyway.

"Well hopefully the Wheelers will be here soon."

You stab at your Eggos and eat them slowly.

You wish you had Cinnamon Rolls, though.

"Kid, look, you're going to be fine," but Hopper is frowning.

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"No, I'm not."

"What can I say to convince you you'll be okay?"

You frown, thinking.

"I don't know."

"Well here is your daily reminder that you're not a monster."

You sigh.

"Thanks..."

Hopper ruffles your hair, which is weirder now that it's so long, but you smile at him. You then go and feed and say hello to Chester and Eddie until you hear a car pull up.

"Well that's them. You got all your books in your bag?"

You nod.

"And pencils and pens?"

You nod again.

"And notebooks and folders and a planner –"

"Yes, Hop!"

"Alright alright," Hopper smiles weakly as a knock goes on the door. You run to open it and see Nancy and Mike. Mike smiles at you, and you're glad to see him smiling.

"Ready?" Nancy asks as Mike rushes in to hug you.

He always hugs you like he hasn't seen you in ages, now.

Even though you saw him *yesterday*.

But you hug him back just as tightly.

"Yeah, she's ready," Hopper grunts.

You grab your backpack hurriedly, and as you do so Hopper follows you to your room.

"Good luck kiddo. Be sure to let me know if you need anything by going to the office."

"Okay!"

"And don't be afraid to ask for help finding anywhere or –"

"Okay!"

"And try to be nice to the other kids –"

“Okay!”

“Don’t use your powers –“

“Hopper!”

Hopper smiles sheepishly. “Sorry, Jane. Hug before you go?”

You hug him and look up at him, murmuring, “I love you.”

He smiles back at you, “I love you too. Have a good first day at school.”

You nod, wave goodbye, and run out to the car where Nancy and Mike are already sitting and waiting for you.

“So, do you both have your schedules?” Nancy asks as she starts it up and begins driving away, Hopper watching you go from the porch.

You nod silently.

“Yeah, we’re in Biology and World History and Freshman Lit and Comp together,” Mike says hurriedly, “But she’s in *Honors Geometry*.”

“How did you even pull that off, Jane?” Nancy asks, smiling though she’s looking at the overgrown dirt road of the woods.

“I took a big test this summer and I did very well.”

“Can’t believe you get to skip algebra.”

“But you’re in Honors Algebra? Isn’t that good?” you ask Mike softly.

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve been having trouble with school so like, I’m glad I’m in an honors class at all, but geez.”

“What else are you guys taking?” Nancy asks.

“I’m in Spanish I and then Gym which will be awful and study hall and lunch. I don’t know what else Jane’s in.”

“I’m taking Spanish I too but I’m nervous,” you admit, “I barely know English.”

“Well we’re all going to help you,” Nancy reassures.

“Yeah,” Mike agrees.

“Thanks,” you mumble, “And... gym too. I think I have Spanish with Dustin and gym with Max and study hall with Will and lunch is all together.”

“And Lucas is in her Honors Geometry class, and so’s Dustin, so that’ll be a party I’m not a part of,” Mike grumbles.

“Yeah but you have Max with you in Honors Algebra.”

“Yeah, I *guess*.”

“Well you all are going to be fine. Freshman year is scary but you have your friends and me and Jonathan are still around,” Nancy reassures, “And you have friends in all your classes!”

“Yeah,” you say, and you smile a little at the thought.

Nancy pulls up to a big building, with lots of other kids walking into it. All the kids look so much *older* than you and Mike and your other friends it’s...

Terrifying.

You slowly get out of the car and Mike immediately takes your hand, helping you walk towards the big building. Nancy follows you both from a slight distance, just enough that you feel safe but not too close that you feel weird.

“Ready?” Mike asks you softly. You turn to him and nod, the two of you walking through the hallways together.

Everyone is loud, and talking, and lots of people are taller than you.

You’d been here once before for registration. You got a locker, and your schedule, and your books. Hopper had been very nervous.

But now it is you who’s nervous.

You go to your locker and open it just like you practiced over and over and over again.

Next to you a tall girl with beautiful hair and bright red lips. You can't help but look at her curiously.

"What are you looking at, fresh meat?" she snaps, before slamming her locker and walking away.

You glare after her, flick your head, and she trips on the floor. Smiling, you grab what you need and start walking, hurriedly, towards where you knew your history room was.

Being a monster has *some* perks.

Mike immediately sits next to you, looking over and smiling.

He seems like himself today.

Maybe the excitement of going to school with you is enough to help him?

At least for today.

Mike reaches over and grabs your hand under the desks, and you smile at him for that, your heart flipping a little in your chest.

You're here.

You're at *school*.

With Mike!

How bad can Mike really be getting when this is *actually happening*?

And then the teacher walks in.

"Okay class. Welcome to High School – I shall be your teacher for World History, Miss Ford. Since this is your first period class, I am in charge for taking attendance; then we will go through the syllabus. Adams, Tiffany –"

You sit back and listen, patiently, your heart in your throat a little

because you know eventually your name is going to come up and everyone is going to ask who you are and oh no you stand out so much because of your clothes and makeup everyone keeps looking at you you should have worn something more normal but you wanted to feel comfortable oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no –

“Hopper, Jane?”

“Here,” you say softly.

Everyone looks over at you in shock.

Now they think you’re Hopper’s daughter.

Well, you are.

Kind of.

The names keep going through and you smile over at Mike when he responds to “Wheeler, Michael.”

“Alright. Now that we’ve gotten that under the way, let’s move on to – what is world history?”

You’re able to keep up, mostly. Taking notes is hard and the teacher says a lot of things and you have to write very very very quickly.

And you keep getting distracted because Mike is next to you and he’ll smile at you sometimes and your heart will do a flip.

The bell rings and its very very jarring but you get up, grab your things, and follow Mike into the hall. He grabs your hand immediately and squeezes it.

“How’d it go?” he asks softly.

“Okay I think,” you admit, “It was a lot.”

“Yeah, but you’ll get used to it,” he reassures. He’s acting way too cheerful.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course.”

You frown at him, but he ignores it.

Which is annoying.

“Well I have gym now. But you’ll see Dustin in Spanish,” Mike says. He leans over to you and kisses you softly, making you let out a soft and happy sound before you can stop yourself.

“I’ll see you at lunch?” you murmur. He nods.

“Lunch. Bye,” and he’s off, and you wish you could just follow him all day, but you know you can’t.

You reach Spanish and you sit with Dustin, smiling over at him. He beams back at you.

“Ready to *habla español*?” he asks eagerly. You frown at him.

“Ready to – what?”

Dustin grimaces as the teacher goes up to the front of the room and says “Hola!”

“Hola,” you mumble back with the rest of the class.

And you basically spend the entire time as confused as humanly possible, even though it is only *the first day*.

“I hate this,” you grunt angrily.

“I am so sorry,” Dustin groans, “We’ll have lots of studying parties, okay? And Mike will be there too!”

You grunt in annoyance and walk away quickly.

It’s going to take all your energy not to make the teacher in that class just fall over and stop talking all those words you don’t understand at all.

Next you have gym. You go to the big room you’re supposed to go to and are surprised to find no one there.

“Hey! You! Get changed!” a large man with a pot belly shouts. You squeak and leave the room, now panicking.

Changed?

Right, you have those other clothes in your bag – but where do you get changed?

“Jane! There you are!”

You turn around in surprise to see Max running up to you and grabbing your arm.

“Come on, this way –“

You follow her down the stairs and into another room where there are a bunch of lockers and a bunch of other girls getting undressed and putting on clothing.

Wait, what?

“You do it in front of everyone?” you whisper, your eyes widening.

You thought you weren’t supposed to get in dressed in front of people – right?

Dustin and Lucas and Mike had acted *so weird* when you tried to do that when you first met –

“Yeah it’s the fucking worst,” Max agrees, “Just don’t look at anyone and they won’t look at you.”

You nod, flushing, and you pick a locker next to Max, getting dressed as quickly as you can.

“Hey!”

You turn around, half dressed, and look at the girl approaching you in fear. You might have seen her in another class, maybe, but you don’t remember exactly.

“Are you Jim Hopper’s daughter?”

“Adopted daughter,” you mumble.

“Where have you been before this year?” she asks, frowning.

“Homeschooled.”

Some other girls start snickering and you quickly put on the rest of your clothes as fast as you can.

They all disperse at that, and you turn to Max nervously.

“Don’t worry about it, they’re just curious,” Max rolls her eyes, “Had to deal with that a *lot* when I was new.”

“Does it ever stop?” you ask softly.

“Yeah eventually. And lucky for you you already have friends, so some of these weirdos who come up to you won’t seem like your only option for friendship, thus making you join them, leading to you being part of a secret apocalypse-fighting team,” Max snorts.

You laugh, “Is that how you met everyone last year?”

“Pretty much. I was new, Dustin and Lucas had crushes on me, they insisted I be their friend, I figured I had no better options, and now here we are, one trauma later.”

You giggle even more, even though you know people are staring at the two of you.

Max rolls her eyes, “C’mon, let’s head up there.”

There isn’t a lot of “syllabus discussion” in this class; the big burly man briefly goes over what’s expected, and then you spend the day running around the room.

It’s awful.

But, at least, right after you have lunch.

You and Max head to the cafeteria together and you find the others at a table, eating and talking. You quickly scurry over to it and sit next

to Mike, who gives you a kiss on the cheek.

“How’d everything go?”

“I hate Spanish *and* gym.”

“Yeah I figured you would. But after lunch we have biology!”

“I’m so excited. I’m completely ready to talk about everything,” Dustin says, clapping his hands together and rubbing them excitedly.

“I can’t believe we’re *all* in the same class,” Lucas says, shaking his head.

“I think Hopper pulled some strings so that I would have an easier time,” you admit.

“I figured,” Lucas nods.

“Did you bring a lunch?” Will asks.

You nod and pull it out, eating your sandwich quietly. Mike wraps his arm around you. You look over at him and his face pulls into a smile where it hadn’t been before.

“Mike...” you mutter.

He continues to smile and eats his lunch too, not saying anything in response.

You’ll have to talk to him when the day is over.

You all head over to Biology together and you sit with Mike at a lab table, like the one you laid on two years ago. You swallow and look down at it, trying to not think about that day and everything you lost.

“Welcome to Biology! The study of life!”

Dustin looks over you and grins and you smile back at him. Max rolls her eyes, but is smirking, and Lucas next to her starts to take notes. Will next to Dustin also smiles at you, mostly in reassurance.

“So, what is life?”

This is the best class you take by far, thanks to the words you’ve already seen and the pictures in the book. It helps to have all your friends with you, too.

“Hey, Hopper!”

You turn around to see a girl run up to you as class ends and your friends all trickle out together.

“You shouldn’t steal a raccoon’s makeup!”

You frown as the girl walks off, laughing with some friends. Mike squeezes your hand tightly.

“A... what?”

“She’s talking about your eyes. Don’t pay attention,” Mike grunts angrily.

“But I thought I was bitchin’?”

“You are,” Mike reassures, “You’re beautiful as always.”

You smile at him and lean in to kiss him, before quickly pulling away in case a teacher saw. Mike smiles back at you.

“Alright lovebirds, class is going to start soon,” Lucas rolls his eyes.

“Lucas why don’t we ever kiss in the hallway.”

“Because we aren’t star-crossed lovers, Max.”

“Well shit.”

“I know. We gotta up our game to compensate.”

You can’t stop giggling.

Mike rolls his eyes, “Alright I have Spanish. Relax in study hall, okay? It’s the first day. You don’t need to study.”

You nod and you and Will head off to study hall together, sitting down in the large room next to each other.

Even though Mike told you not to study, you study Spanish anyway.

You don't want to fail...

You don't want to leave school...

You don't want to leave Mike...

The thought makes you panic so much you study harder.

"Psst!"

You look up and see that Will is handing you a piece of paper. You open it up and see a list of names, with "GOOD BANDS" written in big letters at the top. You look up and grin at Will.

"We can listen after school if you want," Will hisses. You nod rapidly.

You keep studying, and when you look over at Will again you see he's doodling monsters and things in his notebook.

You write on a piece of paper *YOU'RE REALLY GOOD* and hand it to him, and he takes it and grins at you.

"Thanks!" he whispers, and you smile more.

You like study hall.

Or, at least, you like study hall when you're not thinking about how hard school is.

You then file out and walk up to math, sitting down next to Lucas. He grins at you.

You're glad all your friends are trying so hard to make you feel safe.

It's working, too.

"Ready for math?" Dustin says, sitting on your other side and beaming.

"Dustin, how are you not *dead*?" Lucas asks.

"I am fueled by the power of knowledge."

"*It's the first day.*"

"So much knowledge!"

"Of *syllabi*!"

You giggle quietly in between them as the teacher comes in.

"So, Honors Geometry. I'll get right to it –"

You start learning a lot of phrases and talk about 'proofs,' but even though its more wordy than math you've done before you like it, and the class flies by.

And then you move on to English, and you get to be with Mike again, and Will is with you too. You all sit together and you are glad that the day is almost over. It has been long, and you are quite tired.

Of course, English is draining, and by the end of it you're even *more* tired, but at least you're done for the day.

"So what should we do after school?" Mike asks, walking with you out of class.

"Will wants to show me some albums, maybe we could all go over to his house?" you offer.

"Jonathan can drive us!" Will agrees.

"Should we find the others?" Mike asks as you reach your locker and start to pack things into it.

"Hey!"

You turn to see the girl who stands next to you.

"Weirdo," she says, frowning, "Get these weirdos away from my locker."

“No,” you say calmly, putting on your backpack.

“No?”

“You can’t make me,” you say simply.

She glares and opens her mouth again.

“Hey, Erica, leave my little brother and his friends alone,” Jonathan says, walking up to you all with Nancy following him.

Erica scowls, “Eww, I don’t talk to you.” She quickly grabs something from her locker and then walks away.

Nancy waves with a fake looking smile, “Nice to see you too!”

Mike snorts.

“I hate her,” Nancy shakes her head slowly, “Sorry your locker is next to hers.”

You frown and shrug.

“Right, Will, ready to go?” Jonathan asks.

“Can everyone come over?”

“Don’t really see why not, Nance?”

“Nah it’s fine. I’m going to go home and work on some college applications though,” Nancy explains.

“Oh shit. Right. Can I come too? I’ll drop them off and then head over.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Do you all know where your friends are?” Nancy asks, “We should get going.”

“I’ll find them,” Mike offers, running through the school. Eventually he comes back with the others, and you all head over to the Byers house, going to Will’s room and listening to punk bands you haven’t heard before.

Mike still is acting normal, and you wonder when that will break. Because, eventually, it'll have to.

AUGUST 31 1985

"So, Jane. What are you hoping to get out of our meetings?"

You look at Dr. Owens and frown. Hopper's outside the room, in a "waiting room," so you feel safe here. You also just trust Dr. Owens after he helped you to get free.

It's weird to trust a man from the Lab but you are hopeful, lately.

"Um. What are they for?"

Dr. Owens laughs, "Well, to talk about your powers, talk about how joining society is going, maybe talk about what you went through in the Lab."

"Can you talk about that?"

"Well I have a degree in psychology and biology –"

"No, I mean... uh..."

You frown.

"I don't know what I mean."

"That's okay, take your time."

You swallow and try to find your words.

"I mean... will the people... in charge of you... be okay with talking about my past?"

"Well it doesn't matter if they're okay with it, does it?"

You smile a little.

"So – how is school going?"

You frown now.

“It’s been two weeks, you must have *something* to say.”

You swallow and frown even more.

“Take your time again.”

You think for a little while and finally manage to put your thoughts into words.

“It’s hard.”

“Oh?”

“The teachers talk very fast, and there is a lot of work to do at home. There are a lot of things to read. I have to read very fast and I’m not very good at it.”

“Why do you think you’re not very good at it?”

“The letters... all get jumbled up. And mixed up. And turned around? And so I have to read very very slowly.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Owens writes some stuff down, “Who have you told about this?”

“Hopper, and Mike,” you admit softly.

“What did they say?”

“Mike said I should tell someone else and that we’ll figure it out together.”

“Yes, sounds like him.”

“And Hopper said that if I keep practicing I can figure it out.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Owens leans forward in his chair, “Jane, have you heard of dyslexia?”

You shake your head.

“It’s a different way for a brain to work and read words. Basically, it changes how your brain interprets the words it reads on a page,

differently than how most people do it.”

“Oh,” you mumble.

“It sounds like you might have it. I’ll schedule some tests – they’ll be very easy and not anything like you’ve had before, don’t worry – and we’ll see if you do.”

“Will it go away?”

“No, but you will be able to train it, and figure out how to read in your own way.”

You nod, frowning, and trying not to cry.

“Jane? Are you alright?”

You shake your head, holding your face in your hands and crying. You look up after a minute to see Dr. Owens handing you a tissue box. You take it and blow your nose into it, sniffing.

“Jane, do you want to tell me what is wrong?”

You shake your head.

“Alright, then just take your time.”

He says that a lot.

“Take my time for *what?*”

“To collect yourself, breathe, try to get through whatever is making you sad, even for the moment.”

You nod again.

“Um...”

“Yes, Jane?”

“I’m sad a lot.”

“That’s common.”

“Common for... what?”

“For people who go through traumatic experiences.”

“Traumat...ic?”

“It means something awful. Something that changes who you are and how you see the world.”

“Oh.”

“So you being raised in the lab was traumatic for you.”

You nod.

“Will I ever stop feeling... this sad... a lot?”

“I hope that over time we can get to that point together.”

You nod again.

You hope he’s right.

S E P T E M B E R 1 6 1 9 8 5

“I hate my dad I hate my dad I hate my dad I hate my dad I hate my dad I hate my dad I hate my dad *I hate my dad I had my dad I HATE MY DAD!*”

You sit, in one of your nicest dresses, watching Mike pace back and forth in front of you.

“Mike...”

“I hate him! I hate him! I hate him! I hate him!”

“Mike!”

He whirls around and looks at you.

“What?”

You reach out for his hand and he takes yours.

so rude! Everyone saw him do it! The shofar was *blowing!* Blowing, Jane!”

“I know, I was there.”

“We got *school off for this!* He took off *work!* And he just *gets up and leaves!*”

“It was extremely mean.”

“He doesn’t even try! He doesn’t even try! I get that he doesn’t love mom but does he love his *kids* enough to not fucking do that to *us?*”

You shake your head, frowning. Mike sits down on the floor, crying and holding his head in his hands. You slide down and hold him, rubbing his shoulder calmly.

“It’ll be okay, Mike. It’ll be okay.”

He reaches into his nightstand but you fling the razor out of his hand before he can put it to anything.

“Hey –“

“Not on Rosh Hashanah.”

“But –“

“New year, right? Book of... something?”

“Life.”

“Right. If you do that you hurt me. Do you really want to have to get my forgiveness within ten days?”

He shakes his head quietly.

“That’s what I thought.”

Mike pokes you weakly, but then goes back to crying.

“Can I smoke at least?”

You sigh heavily.

“Fine. Out the window, please.”

He nods and opens up the window, smoking a cigarette for a long time. He then comes back and sits next to you.

“Sorry.”

You just shake your head and rest it against your knees.

“Mike, I’m sorry your dad is the world’s Biggest Mouthbreather.”

Mike nods, “Yeah. He is.”

“But you need to...”

“To what? If you spout some crap that doctor you see said to you –“

“It’s not crap! It’s science!”

“Fine.”

“You need to learn that just because he’s an awful person, doesn’t mean you are.”

Mike frowns at you for a long time.

“And you shouldn’t hurt yourself because your dad is awful.”

He sighs.

“it’s not just that. I just... feel like everything is out of my control. Camp this summer was awful. School is really hard and I’m struggling.”

“So am I.”

“Yeah but you’re new...”

“So? High School is new for you.”

Mike nods and cries some more. You hold him tightly, just trying to

keep him put together.

You know ignoring your own problems is not going to end well. You know it, Dr. Owens knows it, even Hopper has said it.

But you can't just stop helping Mike.

He needs you.

"Mike?" you murmur quietly after a while. He looks up at you.

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

He smiles weakly at you.

"I love you too."

You lean in and kiss his forehead, "Let's go eat some apples and honey. Right? That's what you eat today, right?"

"Yeah," Mike snuffles, "Yeah, we have some downstairs."

"Great. Let's go eat some. And you're not allowed to talk to your dad."

Mike laughs weakly, "Okay." And you take his hand and go together downstairs.

It takes all of your self control to not kill his father on sight.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yes, yes I am updating quickly.

I have reasons, namely, Thanksgiving coming up and with my daily update schedule it's timed awkwardly with a chapter I really really really REALLY don't want to post alone, i want to post the next chapter IMMEDIATELY (so you all don't kill me, frankly), so I don't want to have to write two chapters on Thanksgiving, and here we are basically, with me

being a crazy person

Anyways, if you're wondering, "Wow, Jane seems fine! That's odd!" have you considered: she is 100% compartmentalizing so that she can help Mike and that is absolutely going to bite her in the ass.

Also, if you're wondering: "Wow, Mike sure is dealing with the first day of school well" the answer is definitely "he's holding it together for Jane and that is 100% going to bite him in the ass as well"

Unhealthy selflessness! It's more likely than you think.

Anyways, loving all the comments and discussions going on! I respond to all the comments (apart from like, thread replies - so not the first comment that person leaves in the thread - that are clearly the end of the conversation) and love talking about this story with you all, so please keep leaving them! Thank you :)

17. Messes Together

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Underage Drinking, Underage Smoking, Self-Harm, Vomiting(?), and Underage Partying

OCTOBER 3 1985

MIKE WHEELER

You can't believe you failed your damn history exam.

You're so fucking screwed.

You study all the time – by yourself, with Jane, with the whole party – but you just don't have the mental presence.

You can't fucking concentrate on *anything* because your parents won't *fucking stop fighting*.

Today is no exception.

You can hear their dulcet tones through the walls of the house as you stare at the little "53%" on your history exam. You get up and creep towards the door, walking outside into the hallway to listen.

"I WILL NOT TAKE IT DOWN, THEODORE!"

"IT'S AN EYESORE!"

"DO YOU WANT TO BE DIFFICULT? IS THAT WHAT THIS HAS ALL BEEN?"

"MAYBE I THINK OUR KIDS HAVE FUCKED UP PRIORITIES!"

"YOU KNOW WHO'S PRIORITIES ARE FUCKED UP, TED? YOURS! YOURS ARE FUCKED UP! YOU CARE MORE ABOUT YOUR DAMN PEACE AND QUIET THAN OUR KIDS –"

"MAYBE I DO! MAYBE I GO TO WORK ALL DAY LONG SO THAT I CAN HAVE A LITTLE PEACE AND QUIET –"

"YOU AGREED! YOU AGREED WHEN WE GOT MARRIED –"

It hurts to listen to this.

You grab your history book and run downstairs, escaping out to the hut outside the house. You dive into the sukkah and start studying, highlighting the words on the page.

It's comforting to be outside. The hut is spacious enough, and there's a table and chairs for when you all eat dinner and breakfast out there, and you like to hear the birds chirping around the hut because it reminds you of the cabin.

Of course, you can't focus on Ancient Greece basically at all, because you *know* they're still screaming and yelling inside, and even though you can't hear them anymore doesn't mean it isn't still weighing on your mind.

"Hey."

You look up to see Nancy.

"Hey," you greet softly.

"Can I come in?"

"It's your sukkah, too."

"Fair enough," Nancy agrees, walking in and sitting across from you.

"Mind if I work on some applications?"

"Not at all."

You both work in silence together, the sounds of highlighters and scratching pens filling the air and mixing with the tweeting birds and dimming of the sky. Nancy lights some candles so you can keep working, now crickets filling your ears quietly.

"How goes history? You have Miss Ford, right?"

"Yeah," you mutter.

"I didn't have her but... Barb did. Barb *hated* her."

"Yeah she's a piece of work," you sigh.

"Are you keeping up with it okay?"

"Not really."

"Oh no..."

"I did fine on the first test but the second one I failed and I'm not sure how I'm going to pull myself up from it."

"Have you told mom and dad?"

"Not yet."

"Well you can pull yourself up from one failed exam. I know you can. You're smart."

"Thanks... how go applications?"

"Oh geez why do we need to talk about them."

"I had to admit I failed a test."

"Fair enough. They're awful. I wish I was just accepted already."

"Unfortunately, that's not how it works."

"In a better world..."

You laugh with her and it makes you feel a little better.

After some quiet working later, you look up to see your mom coming into the sukkah. She brings a bowl of spaghetti and some plates.

"Thought I could find you both out here."

“Mom?” you ask in confusion.

“It’s dinner time. Help me set the table.”

You and Nancy help immediately, not saying anything as you set everything out and Mom dishes out some food. Holly follows her out there, bringing silverware for you all. The four of you sit around the table, and Mom mutters a blessing over the food and for eating in the sukkah.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Dad?” Nancy asks quietly as Mom starts eating.

“Your father will not be joining us tonight,” Mom says brusquely, “Now, come on, eat up.”

Nancy and you look at each other for a minute before digging into the spaghetti without further comment.

“So, Michael, how is school going? Better than last year, I hope?”

“Uh... in some ways,” you answer honestly.

“We at least it’s not worse?”

“In a few ways,” you say softly.

Your mom frowns at you, “Like what?”

Dad isn’t here, so you swallow and try to pull yourself together.

“Um. History is really hard for me.”

Your mom puts down her fork and looks at you seriously.

“Michael, you can tell me. I’d rather you did.”

You nod, grimacing.

“Um... I failed my last test.”

“Did you fail your first test?”

You shake your head rapidly.

“Alright. Well there’s still a lot of semester left, and I will help you whenever I can, okay?”

“Wait... you’re not going to yell at me?”

“You clearly look upset about it enough as it is,” Mom sighs, “So I don’t think yelling would do much good. Your father isn’t here... and we’ll just keep this between all of us, okay?”

You are so confused.

Mom... isn’t yelling?

You don’t... have to tell dad?

What... is happening?

“Are your other classes going okay at least?”

“Um, yeah. I’m doing well in biology and Spanish and English. Math is hard too but I’m not failing it.”

“And gym?”

“Gym is alright. Kind of rough sometimes...”

“Well, our family was never very gifted at athletics,” Mom smiles, “You know, when I was in school, I tried out for the cheerleading team –“

“You *didn’t*,” Nancy gasps.

“I did. And they laughed at me so hard I wanted to die of embarrassment right then and there.”

“What happened after that?” you ask quietly. Holly is not really paying attention to the conversation, just eating quietly and wiggling her head back and forth in happiness.

“Oh, nothing really. Your Bubbe comforted me, reminded me that it’s not the end of the world, and then I went for the debate team

instead. Kind of hard to argue whether or not not making the cheerleading team is the 'end of the world' when your parents are holocaust survivors."

You can't help it, you snort. Mom laughs with you.

"If we don't have humor we don't have anything. But one failed history test isn't the end of the world, Michael. You can do it."

You nod, and smile at her weakly before eating more.

You wish that would have shut up the voice in your head telling you you're utterly doomed.

OCTOBER 9 1985

"Ugh, I can't stop coughing," Dustin groans.

The entire party is sitting in the living room of the Byers house. You have a big biology test the next day and this was the natural choice for studying – Jonathan and Nancy were out, the other houses had distractions (whether it be the birds at Jane's cabin, your fighting parents at your house, Erica at Lucas' place, parents fighting at Max's house, or cats and Dustin's mom constantly showering you all in baked goods at Dustin's).

"Dude just have a mint or something."

"I'm coughing out a lung and you are suggesting a *mint*?"

"Fine, two mints."

"Oh my god –"

"One day Lucas and Dustin will stop bickering like an old married couple," Max snorts, eating popcorn and flipping a page in her biology textbook.

"We aren't married," Dustin protests.

"Dude, we're a little married," Lucas jokes.

“Oh my god –“

Jane writes something down on a piece of paper. You look over at her and frown.

“What are you writing?”

Jane raises an eyebrow at you.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Curious. We’re not studying right now.”

Jane shows you her notebook. In big, scribbly letters it says NUMBER OF TIMES DUSTIN SAYS “OH MY GOD.” Underneath it is a tally, and you can see twelve marks.

You burst out laughing.

Jane can always cheer you up.

“Wait, what? What is it?” Dustin demands.

“Nope. It’s a secret,” you snort.

“Oh come *on* man – “

“It’s not for you!”

Jane holds her mouth behind her hand and laughs more while Dustin pouts.

“Oh my God!”

Jane writes down another tally. You roar with laughter, holding your stomach as you do so.

“That’s it –“

Dustin chases Jane around the room and she screams, running away quickly. Dustin chases her and she locks herself into the bathroom.

“Great, now none of us can pee. Good going Dustin,” Max sighs.

“It’s the powerhouse of the cell,” Dustin says firmly.

“Talk about the stupidest summary I’ve ever heard –“

“You know what, maybe we should all just study on our own!” you shout angrily. Everyone looks at you, worry etched on their faces.

“Mike?” Jane asks softly.

“I can’t focus with you all goofing around all the time!”

“Sorry man. We’ll be more quiet,” Dustin mutters.

“Yeah,” Lucas agrees.

“Thank you,” you grunt angrily, burying your face in the book and trying to focus.

Everyone studies silently for a little while, the only sounds being that of pens and pencils on paper and highlighters against textbooks. You manage to focus and study organelles for a long time, but you can smell Jane’s sweet scent, and hear Dustin tapping his fingers against the table, or Will tapping his pencil against his lips, and it is all *very* distracting.

And then Dustin starts coughing again.

“Oh *come on!*” you shout.

“Dude, I can’t – *cough* – help it!” Dustin protests.

“Yeah, Mike,” Jane murmurs.

“I can’t hear myself think when you do that!”

“I would stop if I could!”

“Argh!” you shout again, gripping your hair tightly in your hands and trying to pull on it.

“Woah woah woah –“

“Mike take a deep breath –“

“It’s okay, it’s okay –“

“Maybe you should go home and just try to study alone –“

“Guys give him space – “

You take a deep breath and stop gripping your hair, looking over at Jane as she frowns at you with worry.

“Sorry,” you mumble.

“It’s okay,” she whispers back, though you can see she’s trying to not cry.

“Um... maybe you’re right. Maybe I should head back.”

“Totally understandable,” Will says reassuringly. You nod at him and frown.

“Wait... I was going to help you study –“

“It’s okay man, we have half a year until my Bar Mitzvah, it’s late anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks, man,” you mutter quietly. Will nods at you and you get up, packing your books into your backpack.

“I can come with you...” Jane mumbles.

“Um... no, it’s fine. I know you wanted to ask Lucas some questions and I don’t want you to do badly because of me,” you mumble back.

“But –“

“Seriously, Jane, it’s okay. I promise.”

Jane looks upset, so you lean down and kiss her softly before leaving, going out to your bike and peddling back to your house.

Inside, for once, it’s quiet. You creep upstairs to your room and sit down with your book, trying to study.

You manage to do it for a little while, studying about organelles and

the nucleus and everything else in the cell, but your thoughts are too jumbled.

You remember Jane's face when you left the house.

Stupid.

Stupid selfish idiot.

Stupid selfish worthless idiot.

What is the *point* of you if you're not around to help her get through it all?

Why does it matter that you're struggling? You can figure it out. It's *her* first time at school.

Stupid worthless piece of *shit* Wheeler.

Worthless, awful, horrible, waste of space and air and food Wheeler.

You start crying and you hold your head in your hands, just sobbing into your arms as hard as you can. You still can't hear anything in the rest of the house – perhaps your family is actually out of it for once?

You pull out a cigarette from your nightstand and light it, taking a deep breath of it and blowing out the smoke for a long time. It brings you some relief from the crushing weight in the pit of your stomach, but you still can't escape the thought spiral – if anything, the rush makes it tighten.

Piece of shit.

Awful.

Worthless.

Terrible.

Stupid.

Waste of Space.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself.

You hate yourself –

You finally grab the razor and just drag it across your wrist without thinking, letting it dig deep into your flesh. You remember how it stung so bad the first time you did this.

Now you can't imagine going that shallowly.

Blood rushes out of your wrist and you wrap it up with a bandage from under the bed. You tie it tightly and take a long, deep breath.

That's the third time today, though the other two were actually at school, in the corner of a bathroom stall where no one could see.

But you haven't told Jane.

You don't want her to know there's a problem.

OCTOBER 13 1985

You have another history test and you can't stop freaking out.

The words and the dates and everything swim in your head and you don't *care about Ancient Greece enough* to actually pay attention to it and you can't study and you can't stop freaking out and you can't calm down and you're going to fail again you're going to fail again you're going to fail again you're going to –

“Mike.”

You look up at Jane. She's trying to help you study.

She has a black eye from where she got into a fight with someone who was making fun of you during lunch and he hit her and she made him fly back against a chair and when the teachers asked she just said that she pushed him and now she has detention and you really had to stop letting her do these things for you it isn't safe it isn't safe it isn't safe it isn't safe it isn't safe it isn't safe it isn't safe –

“Mike!”

You shake your head rapidly and groan.

“Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry –“

“Mike, deep breaths.”

You try but you can't find your lungs.

“Mike!”

You aren't even really looking anywhere you can't really put your thoughts with what you see and everything is spinning everything is spinning everything is spinning –

“MIKE!”

She's shaking you.

This finally pulls you out of your thoughts.

You look at her and pant, trying to not freak out again. Her eyes are staring deeply into yours and it snaps your brain back to the present, back to the brown in a sea of black eye make up and pale skin apart from the shiner.

You breathe in.

And Out.

In.

And out.

In.

And out again.

In.

And out.

And in.

And out.

“Okay. Mike. It’s going to be okay,” Jane whispers.

“No –“

“Yes.”

“How can you know?”

“I can’t.”

She looks sad to be saying it.

“Then why say it?”

“Because thinking it won’t be isn’t going to help anyone, most of all you.”

You nod, and you start crying again, holding your face in your hands tightly. Jane pries your hands away from your face and you look at her in shock. She leans over and kisses you on your nose, and then on your eyes, smudging the tears that are hanging there. You squeak in surprise at this, your heart pounding rapidly as you look at her.

“Jane – what –“

“Shh,” she whispers, and she kiss you softly, making you squeak again. You kiss her back before you can stop herself, and your worries float away up into the sky above...

“Better?” she asks quietly. You nod rapidly, your eyes wide.

“Much.”

She smiles weakly at you and sits back down, pulling out the history book.

“Come on, let’s study more.”

“Jane... Jane I’m so scared.”

“I know, but you can do it. You’ll be fine.”

“No I won’t –“

“Yes, you will!” Jane shouts, looking angry now. You swallow and nod.

“O... okay.”

“Sorry,” Jane mumbles, “But we have to study.”

You nod again and lean over the book, trying to focus on dates and information, but it’s still swimming.

“Hey.”

You look up at Jane again.

“What?” you mutter quietly.

“Do you want to quiz each other?”

“I don’t think I’m at that point yet.”

“Neither am I. We can struggle together.”

You smile weakly at her, “Thanks, Jane.”

“Alright, so,” she holds up her book and frowns, “What is the difference between Corinthian, Doric, and Ionian column?”

“Uh... I don’t know...”

“Alright well Doric are kind of tapered at the top, they don’t have

much that's interesting, then Ionian –“

And that's how it goes for a while – you'll ask each other questions, and sometimes you'll know the answer, but mostly you'll have no clue, and you'll explain the answers to each other calmly and kindly as you make your way through the chapter.

“Thank you Jane,” you mumble quietly, “I just can't stop when I –“

“I know, I do that too,” Jane whispers.

You lean over and kiss her on the forehead, and she smiles a little, like how she used to smile back before everything got fucked up.

Now she smiles wider but things are worse.

Well, okay. Will's okay and you're not running away from the Bad Men. But.

You feel worse.

You're back in your basement, somehow, even though you're in your bedroom – or at least – you thought you were in your bedroom – you're in your bedroom, right? With Jane, studying history – but

You're in the basement, and you're talking to Jane – El – Jane – El –

El with the puffy sweatshirt and the buzzed hair and the cute younger face –

Jane with the shoulder length hair and older beautiful face and the underground band (“Bad Religion” that Jonathan had showed her) t-shirt –

El looking shy and not talking –

Jane trying to get you to talk to her –

El crouching in the fort and smiling a little bit at you, that small smile you miss sometimes because now she smiles so wide across her whole face –

Jane crying and shaking you –

“Can you please stop that –“

You’re saying that in the past and the present –

Are you saying that in the present?

“Why – why should I stop –“

Present Jane says this –

Past El says nothing, just fiddles with a walkie –

What –

Wait –

Where are you –

You shout in pain –

No, you’re *screaming* in pain –

And then you’re back in your room.

You pant, heavily, looking at Jane in confusion.

“Mike? Mike!” she’s shouting, and she’s crying, smudging everything on her face.

You lean over and vomit on the floor.

“Mike!” Jane screams.

You look over at her, panting and sweating.

“I... don’t know what just happened,” you whimper.

Jane doesn’t say anything, just looks at you with a white face and wide eyes.

“I... I... I...”

“Mike you’re scaring me.”

You cry.

“I’m sorry –“

“What happened?”

“I don’t *know!*”

“Where did you go?”

“I went somewhere?”

“In your head – “

“I was back with you in the basement. When you were hiding. When we first met.”

“You... you were?”

“But also here –“

“I’m confused.”

“Me too.”

She reaches out and holds your head in her hands and moves it back and forth, looking at it with a frown.

“I don’t see anything wrong with you.”

“Maybe it’s just a... flashback? Maybe?” you mumble.

Your head is aching and your mind is spinning.

“Flashback?” Jane asks.

“When... last year... Will... kept going into Upside-Down... the doctor thought he was reliving... when he was down there... he wasn’t but... it’s a thing that... happens,” your words stumble out of your mouth like they’re falling down three flights of steps, your head doesn’t stop spinning, and you want to lie down for a year.

“Okay... are they like this though?” Jane mutters.

“I dunno but what else could it have been?” you demand quietly, looking at her and trying to not cry.

“I... don’t know. Okay. It’s a flashback. Are we done studying?”

“The test is *tomorrow!*”

“But you’re sick!”

“We have to clean this up and get back to studying.”

“Mike...”

“Jane, please, I can’t handle failing another test okay? I just can’t handle it. I can’t I can’t I can’t I can’t –“

Jane nods, pulling your hands into hers and holding onto them tightly. You squeeze back weakly for a long minute, before the two of you quickly clean up the the vomit and go back to studying.

At the very least, you manage to pass the test.

OCTOBER 21 1985

You’re up all night with a panic attack again.

The end of October is rapidly approaching.

You know what that means.

You know what’s happened, now, two years in a row.

Utter disaster.

Something terrible.

Losing your friends.

Someone dying.

People getting hurt.

You and the people you care about, traumatized.

Monsters in the woods.

Crops spoiling.

Everything going to shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

You want to run out the door, grab the whole party, and escape to somewhere safe.

But you know you can't.

You know that isn't allowed.

So you lie awake and you stare up at the ceiling and you want to scream you want to scream you want to scream you want to scream you want to scream you want to –

Jane.

You get up, grab some clothes, pack things into your bag, and crawl out of the window. You run to your bike and peddle, as fast as you can, through the town.

It's eerily quiet, given that it's one in the morning. You ride as fast as you can, through the woods, over to the cabin.

You drop your bike off in front of the cabin and run over to the door, standing outside of it.

You wish you could just psychically call Jane over, but you know that you can't knock without Hopper hearing.

You frown and walk around the back of the cabin, creeping over to the window where Jane's room is. You knock very, very quietly and wait.

The window is thrown open and Jane peers down at you with wide eyes.

"Mike?"

"I can't sleep," you hiss.

She immediately closes the window again and runs to the front, so you run around to the front of the cabin. She lets you in, looking at you in worry.

"Why can't you sleep?"

Her hair is still fairly short, so it's sticking up everywhere in a curly little ball.

"I don't know, I can't stop panicking."

"Mike?"

You start pacing the room, running your hands through your hair and trying to not cry.

"I just can't stop thinking about everything that always happens this time of year and how it's this time of year again and what if something happens and what if someone else dies and what if *you* die and I can't handle the thought of you dying and what if the Mind Flayer comes back or Brenner comes back or *someone* –"

"Mike," Jane whispers, "Shh."

But you're already freaking out, and you pace around the room while tearing at your hair.

"WHAT IS GOING ON?"

You turn in a panic to see Hopper, panting in the doorway to his room, looking at you both angrily.

“I’m – I’m sorry – I’m sorry –“

“What the fuck are you doing Wheeler?” Hopper shouts.

“He’s having a panic attack!” Jane says angrily.

Hopper immediately calms, sitting down and sighing.

“Sorry. I was startled.”

You nod, tears streaming down your face.

You can’t calm down either.

So you just keep pacing.

“Why is he panicking?” Hopper asks.

“He thinks something is going to happen again this year.”

“Yeah, I’m panicking about that too.”

Hopper coughs for a long moment before groaning.

“Okay, kid. You can stay here. But, uh. I’m not sure how much less you can panic here.”

You flush furiously and shrug, “I wanted to be near Jane.”

The look Hopper gives you clearly says *You’re killing me kid* but you don’t look away.

“Fine. You guys can have a sleepover out here. And please *sleep*, you have school tomorrow.”

“Yes Hop,” Jane reassures.

“*Out here.*”

“Yes!” you say, nodding rapidly with your eyes wide. Hopper gives you a look and then goes to grab you both some blankets, before turning back into his room. He leaves the door partially open.

“Why is he acting weird,” Jane mutters.

“Dunno,” you mutter, and you hate yourself for lying, “Let’s just... sleep.”

You lie down next to her, and you hold each other in your arms, and you manage to fall asleep eventually, even though worries and fears of the future refuse to stop dancing angrily in your head.

O C T O B E R 31 1985

This is the first year you haven’t gone trick or treating.

You’re having a party instead, and you actually don’t mind it much.

You and the whole rest of the party are at some other kid’s house, all dressed up in costumes. Jane is dressed as Leia and you’ve dressed as Han to match, though she insists on carrying around a lightsaber with her.

“Ha! Hopper!” someone shouts at her. She looks up and glares.

“What?”

“Should have worn the bikini.”

“Why? I’d be cold,” Jane demands, frowning even more.

She had loved Return of the Jedi when you took her to see it, but of course that had been a while ago now.

“Classic Hopper,” the girl snorts, before walking away. Jane looks up at you and frowns.

“Should I have worn the bikini?”

“No,” you answer immediately, “You would have been cold.”

You still don’t know what she knows and what she doesn’t know and you don’t want to be the first person to break through that complete topical silence.

For some reason, you have a feeling it would be a bad idea.

Jane nods, and goes to grab a drink.

“Wait, you don’t know what’s in that –“ you say, running up to her. She gives you a look.

“I can handle it.”

“But –“

“I can handle it.”

You can tell from her face that she isn’t going to take no for an answer. She pours a bunch of the punch into a cup and drinks it, smiling as she does so.

You take some too, drinking and pressing your cup against hers. It burns on the way down, and you feel kind of woozy, and not in a good way.

“There’s alcohol in this isn’t there,” you say, frowning.

“Yup,” Jane says, “Bitchin’.”

You frown at her.

You don’t want her to start drinking again.

But who are you to talk? You cut multiple times a day and honestly have to eat a bunch of sugary foods to not feel faint most days.

“Come on, let’s dance,” Jane urges, and before you know it she’s dragged you to the dance floor and twirling around together, even though everyone around you is dancing in much different ways. She doesn’t seem to care though, and she’s smiling and laughing at you, and you can’t help but smile and laugh at you.

“Guys!”

You look over to see Will running up to you, dressed as Chewbacca.

“What is it?” you ask.

“Max is like, *super* drunk, and Lucas is having trouble –“

“Fuck,” you mutter, and you and Jane run over to Max, who is vomiting into a bush. Max is dressed as Lobot, and Lucas as Lando (he wanted to this year), and Dustin is dressed as Luke.

“What do we do?” Dustin asks, pacing, “What do we do?”

Jane immediately runs forward to Max and helps her up, letting Max lean on her shoulder. You watch in amazement as Jane leads Max over to a bench and helps her sit down.

“Okay, you just rest,” Jane says softly, “If you feel like you’re going to pass out, lie down on your side. Lucas?”

Lucas runs forward and nods.

“Watch her. If she passes out, come find one of us and we’ll take her home,” Jane says simply. Lucas nods and hugs her, mouthing *thanks*.

Jane just nods and heads back inside, so you follow her quickly.

“Jane –“

“I need more.”

“Jane...”

“Don’t yell at me.”

“I’m not going to!”

“Good!”

Jane grabs another drink and chugs it, before chugging a third. You watch her with worry, frowning and feeling yourself tense up.

“Sorry,” Jane mumbles, “I’m just...”

“What?” you ask quietly.

“Stressed.”

You nod, “Yeah. I’m sorry. I haven’t been easy lately.”

Jane leans up and kisses you softly, making some boys whoop in a corner. You flick them off without thinking, before pulling away from her.

“I don’t care, Mike. I really don’t. I love you,” she says, and all her words come out jumbled and slurred, but she smiles as she says it, “I just... school is hard for me too. I need to... I think Dustin called it let off steam?”

“Yeah,” you agree, “Me too.” You take two cups of punch yourself and drink it, and sway on your feet in shock.

“Mike!” Jane shouts, “You haven’t had as much experience as me –“

“I am quickly realizing that –“ you slur out.

“Oh no,” Jane groans, and she helps keep you upright, but you pull her out to dance and you spin her around a lot, even though you’re already dizzy.

“Mike!” Jane gasps.

“S-sorry –“

“You need to go sit down too.”

You nod, and you watch her as she drags you outside, and she looks so beautiful, you just wish you could kiss her all the time –

You’re sitting next to Max and you sway in your spot, your head spinning –

Spinning –

Spinning –

Spinning –

Suddenly you feel like you’re looking over a cliff, down to a quarry below –

You spin back –

Quarry –

Party –

Quarry –

Party –

Quarry –

Party –

Quarry –

Party –

Vomit –

Jane holds your curly hair back as you vomit all over the ground, and soothes you, and you flit back to the present.

You're so dizzy you can't even think properly but why would you get a flashback *now*?

Why were you getting flashbacks at all?

"I'm a mess," you mumble quietly.

"So am I," Jane reassures, and you somehow find this comforting, even though she's your main source of relief.

"We're all messes together," Max reassures softly, her words all meshed together still.

"Yeah," Will agrees.

"And we'll get through this as a team," Lucas finishes.

"As a *Party*," Dustin emphasizes.

You look up at all of them and smile weakly, before resting your head against Jane's shoulder and just trying to regain yourself.

All messes together.

Well at the very least there's that, you guess.

Notes for the Chapter:

ARGH that chapter was surprisingly difficult to pump out; I had trouble reaching my usual word count? But here we are

I refuse to answer any questions about the flashbacks. None. Y'all will just have to be patient and figure it out in time.

Poor Mike, falling down into a drainhole of terribleness... with Jane quick to follow... isn't this fun? Weeeeeeee!

Please leave me comments, I love all of them so much it's what keeps me going :D Thank you!!

18. Prelude

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for references to underage drinking, bullying, allusions about underage sex, and references of self-harm

N O V E M B E R 1 1 9 8 5

J A N E H O P P E R

You wake up with your head pounding again.

Everything just *hurts*.

And you don't really particularly want to get out of bed.

"Jane, come on. You have school."

"Fuck off," you mutter quietly into your pillow.

"Jane, seriously?"

"Sorry," you mumble.

"I don't care about the swearing, just... I'm assuming you drank last night?"

"Yeah."

"How much did you drink?"

"Dunno. It was punch."

"How many cups?"

"Four."

"*Four?*"

"Three all at once and then another later on."

“Good grief, kid.”

You bury your head in the pillow more and grumble.

“You get into fights. You use your powers. You mouth off to teachers. Honestly the only thing that seems to actually be going okay is that your grades are pretty damn high.”

“I’m getting a B in Spanish,” you mutter.

“Yeah, and an A- in English, and A’s in everything else. I’m very proud of you.”

You finally remove your head from the pillow, “You are?”

“I am. But you really need to get your act together,” Hopper sighs.

You glare at him, “Didn’t you get in trouble a lot in High School?”

“Do as I say not as I do.”

“Bullshit.”

“Kid...” He doesn’t finish his sentence, but lets out a long and rough cough.

“Bull. Shit,” you shout, sitting up and glaring at him, “That’s bullshit.”

“Fine, you want a reason?”

“Yes!”

“Because people care about your conduct. Because you’re a smart kid and you should go to college and do something with that brain of yours that doesn’t involve moving things with it, but schools are going to look at how you behave and if they see you’re a ‘problem’ child they won’t take you.”

“Oh,” you mutter.

“There it is, kid.”

“Did you go to college?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I got into a lot of trouble in high school, I’m *not* a smart cookie like you are, and frankly I didn’t want to. I went to the army instead.”

“The... army?”

“Yeah, the Vietnam war. We talked about it a little while we finished up your history overview this summer.”

“I remember. You just haven’t mentioned it before...”

You’re confused. You remember seeing a box with “VIETNAM” on it down underneath the floorboards last year, but neither of you have ever really talked about it together before.

“Well I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“It was rough, Jane.”

You nod, “Okay.”

“But you don’t have to do that. You don’t have to do any of that. You can go to college. But you can’t... be acting out like this forever. They won’t like that.”

“I’ll try to do better,” you mutter softly.

“That’s all I can ask. Now, are you actually up for going to school today?”

You groan again.

“Alright, I’ll call you in sick. Just *please* don’t make a habit of this.”

You nod and roll back over in bed, pressing your face into the pillow

and falling fast asleep again.

You wake up sometime later in the day, crawling out of bed and walking back over to the living room. The birds scream immediately upon you entering and you run to them, opening the cage and letting them both crawl onto your arms.

“Hey guys,” you greet quietly, not saying much of anything as your head continues to pound. The birds scream in your ear anyway, but you don’t mind much. You just listen to them and give them scratches, before cleaning out their food bowls and the bottom of their cage.

You then sit down and start watching TV with them on your shoulders, before you hear a knock on the door.

You frown and get up, opening the door and looking in shock.

“Can we talk?” Max asks, looking exhausted. You nod and let her in, putting Chester on her shoulder. She proceeds to lie down on the floor – no, flop is a better word for it.

“Jaaaaane.”

“Maaaaax?” you respond, frowning.

“I skipped school today because yesterday was a mistake.”

“I’m not confused about that...”

She looks up and stares at you, “Let’s be real for one second.”

You nod quietly.

“Don’t you hate being the new kid?”

“Yeah,” you mutter, “All the time.”

“Like, don’t get me wrong. The boys are great. But I would like to have the opportunity to make new friends.”

You frown, “I dunno...”

“Okay, you’re a great big ol’ bag of strange,” Max pauses, “So I get why you wouldn’t want to have other friends. And that’s fine for you.”

You smile.

“But *I* had a normal life at one point, and as much as I love being a part of the Apocalypse Brigade, I also wouldn’t mind being able to hang out with other people too. Have multiple groups of friends. But the moment I try to *talk* to anyone else they brand me as a loser nerd with weirdo friends. Do you ever get that?”

“I don’t really try to talk to other people,” you mumble.

“Yeah,” Max sits up and frowns at you, “Yeah, I guess you’re not the right person to talk to about this either.”

“I don’t mind though.”

“Like, the reason we were all at that party last night was ‘cause I was trying to befriend Olivia and she was like ‘you should come to the party I’m having for Halloween!’ so I was like ‘okay sure I was going to do stuff with some other friends’ and she’s like ‘bring them along’ and so then I did, we all went together rather than trick or treat because of that and then when I got there with you all she was like ‘oh I didn’t realize you meant *them*’ and I was like ‘what are you *talking* about’ and she was like ‘I figured you had non-loser friends’ and then she and a bunch of her friends *laughed* at me and it was so mortifying, you know?”

“I would have just punched them.”

“I thought about it but I didn’t want us to get kicked out. We’d all *just* gotten there and Dustin was being challenged to a keg stand.”

“Which was a mistake.”

“And then I didn’t want to get one upped so I drank way too much and now here I am dead on your floor.”

“Which was also a mistake.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“Why do you want other friends so much?” you ask quietly.

Max sits up and frowns at you.

“How do I explain this... basically whenever we all hang out all we talk about is like, school, or nerdy stuff, or the strange things, or how everyone’s screwed up, and that’s fine, but sometimes I want to talk about other things. Like skateboarding! Or boys – and look, Jane, I love you, but we can’t talk about those boys together, you end up defending them all the time –“

“I do not –” you’re mostly confused that she’d say ‘I love you’ to you, but you’re going along with it.

“You do too! Last time I complained about them to you you were like ‘well Mike just doesn’t like to be surprised’ or ‘Will needed the green pencil for his trees’ and I just wanted to complain!”

You sigh, “Okay.”

“But that’s okay! We don’t have to complain about the boys together. And I’d complain about them to the other boys but none of them can keep a damn secret to save their lives –“

You giggle at that.

“Well, they can keep their *own* secrets, but not other peoples.”

You laugh more.

“So like, who do I complain about our group to?”

“I don’t know,” you admit, “I mostly just talk with Mike.”

“And I’d do that with Lucas, but Lucas is really bad at talking about these things. He gets *super* uncomfortable. Plus, you know, you and Mike hang out more than we do.”

“Why?”

“Cause you guys are like, soulmates –“

“What’s a soulmate?”

Max rests her head on her hands and frowns at you, “Surely you know that one by now.”

“I think I’ve heard it? But I’ve stopped questioning every word I hear now... I just kind of figure I’ll find out eventually.”

“Right, makes sense. Well a soulmate is like... it’s more than just the person you’re in love with, or even like, the person you marry or whatever. Soulmate is basically... if you have one, you’re *destined* to be together. You aren’t just in love, you aren’t just together, you’re like... inseparable. Like magnets are pulling the two of you together. I love Lucas,” Max pauses, “Wow that was hard to say –“

You smile.

“I basically have only told him. Anyway, I love Lucas, but like, if something happened and we weren’t together anymore, I’d be upset, and it would take me some time to move on, but I like, could, you know?”

You frown, but nod.

You don’t really know but you understand, you think.

“But like. You and Mike. I feel like you could move on eventually but you’d never be whole again if you lost him. And same for him and you. That’s what being a soulmate is.”

You nod again.

“Yeah. I don’t... yeah.”

“Anyways, that’s a cheerful topic,” Max pauses, “Back to the main thing – basically I just want to have other people to talk to about stuff.”

“I don’t really... think I need that,” you admit.

“That’s fine for you,” Max shrugs, “We’re different people.”

You laugh, “Yes.”

It seems so obvious that it wouldn’t even need to really be said, but you find it funny.

“Also like, I need someone to talk to about... girl shit,” Max groans, “I hate saying that sentence.”

“Girl... shit?”

“You know, bras and periods and stuff.”

“Right.”

You don’t know, but you don’t want to seem stupid in front of her.

“And you just aren’t the one to talk about it all.”

“No, I’m not,” you agree.

“And I can talk to Nancy sometimes but she’s older and she has other concerns like sex, and I’m not at that point yet, so I don’t really want to talk about that.”

You just nod again, not wanting to question her.

You have no idea what she’s even talking about.

“Like, can you even imagine being naked in front of a boy? Yeesh.”

You frown.

A wave of memories wash over you and you don’t like them.

They make you feel gross, and icky, and not yourself – like you’ve gone backwards in time two years to someone you used to be.

But you nod anyway in agreement with her, because you get the feeling that she’s grossed out by the thought, and you agree with that.

"How's *your* headache doing?" Max asks.

You sigh, "It hurts. Let's have some water."

Max agrees and you spend the rest of the day watching movies together and playing with the birds, but you can't help but feel shaken the whole time.

NOVEMBER 2 1985

You're sitting next to Will's bed, drawing on a piece of paper and humming along to the song playing on the stereo. Will is singing along with it, drawing as well, his face lit up into a wide smile you aren't used to seeing on it.

"Don't you just *love* this song?"

"Yeah," you agree, grinning at him, "Thank you for showing me."

"Of course! They go a *little* hard for my taste but honestly they're just way too good."

"I like how intense they are," you argue, looking up and smiling at him, "Especially Bad Words".

"We can listen to that again!" Will says, "Give me a sec."

He rewinds the tape a bunch and finds the song, playing it and banging his head, sending his long hair all around. You bang your head with him, making your curly hair go all over the place. You both laugh together and scream along with the lyrics, dancing all around his room.

"What's the name of this group again?" you ask when you finish dancing around, frowning at him.

"Oh – Circle Jerks."

"Circle... Jerks?"

"Yeah."

“What does that mean?”

“I dunno, but I like their stuff.”

“Me too,” you beam at him, and you listen to more of it as you both doodle together.

“How is art class?”

“Good! I like a lot of the kids in there.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. No one calls me ‘zombie boy’.”

You laugh quietly, “That sounds nice.”

“It is. And I get to draw every day!”

“I wish I could.”

“You always could in study hall –“

“That’s Spanish class number two and you know it.”

“Yeah yeah – can I see what you’re working on?”

You nod and show him a drawing of one of your birds. Will grins at you.

“Nice Chester. You should show him when you get home.”

“He’ll just eat the paper.”

You both giggle together for a while.

“What are you drawing?” you ask him.

“Oh... one sec,” Will quickly colors something and then shows you. It’s a picture of a scene under the ocean, and there are a bunch of rainbow – colored fish swimming through colorful coral.

“Wow!” you breathe.

“Yeah, I’m really proud of this one. Think Mom’ll put it on the fridge like I’m five or something,” Will grins.

“She’s proud of you,” you say simply.

“Yeah,” Will laughs. He looks over out the door of his room and frowns.

“What’s wrong?” you ask.

“Oh... nothing.”

“Come on, Will.”

Will looks at you and frowns.

“Just wish Jonathan was around more.”

“Oh...”

“He’s always with Nancy, which is fine, but like... I dunno. He’s going away to college next year. We only have so much time together, you know?”

You nod.

“Are he and Nancy soulmates?” you ask quietly. Will frowns at you.

“I dunno.”

“You know what those are, right?”

“Course I do,” Will laughs.

“Do you not think they exist? Or something?”

You’ve been having your own doubts since you talked to Max yesterday.

“Oh, I think they’re a thing.”

“Oh...”

“You and Mike, for example. Total soulmates.”

You laugh.

“And everyone has one.”

“Everyone... has one?”

“Yeah!”

“How do you know?”

You don’t find yourself believing him and you want to know *why* he thinks this.

“I don’t, really. But I hope so,” Will smiles, but his smile is sad.

“What’s wrong?” you ask quietly.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just hope I have one,” Will shrugs, “I feel... alone, a lot.”

“You’re not alone. I’m right here.”

Will smiles at you, “I mean like, like I’ll never find someone to be with, you know? Like I’m just... doomed to never fall in love.”

“That’s stupid.”

Will glares a little at you.

“I mean – of course someone’s going to fall in love with you.”

“It just seems unlikely.”

You lean over and flick him on the arm and he shouts.

“Don’t think like that. You’ll find someone.”

He smiles sadly again.

“Yeah. Someone.”

And you both return to drawing while listening to music.

N O V E M B E R 3 1 9 8 5

“Hey Mike?”

“Yeah Jane?”

“Are we soulmates?”

Mike spits out the water he was sipping.

“Are we – what now?”

“Soulmates. Max explained to me what it is and told me we are. Will thinks we are too.”

“Uh...”

“Sorry,” you frown.

“No, no, it’s... uh... it’s fine. I guess we are?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m not sure I believe in the idea, honestly.”

“Oh...” But, truthfully, you’re a little relieved.

“Like, one person you’re *destined* to be with forever? And *everyone* has one? That seems wrong. It implies a lot more order to the universe than I think there actually is.”

You look at him seriously, “Talk to me more about it.”

Mike sighs, “I mean, like. Everything sucks. I think I believe in God... most... days... maybe...”

“I am never going to understand God,” you huff, frowning.

“You don’t have to.”

“Thanks.”

"But like... everything's random, you know? Like you and I meeting was just by chance. My grandparents surviving the shoah was just by chance. There are plenty of hypothetical other kids out there who's grandparents died during it and like, they don't exist. I'm just lucky. So why should there be someone out there I'm *destined* to be with?"

You nod in understanding.

"But I mean. I guess. In a more... loose sense. Like, not 'destiny' or a set thing for every person or whatever but more..."

"That person is a part of you?" you offer quietly, coming up with words to describe what you'd been trying to figure out for two days.

"Yeah," Mike agrees, just as quietly, "Then I can get on board with that."

You look at him for a long time and your heart is pounding much too fast in your chest, because he's giving you *that look* again, the one he gave you when you reunited last year, or at the snow ball, or when he came back from camp, and it always makes you feel so weird, but now you felt weird already because of what you and Max talked about, and you're just confused but you're also happy because he's looking at you like that again and it always makes you happy and your stomach flip and your heart pound and your fingers tingle and you just... want... to...

He leans in and kisses you, and it's different from other kisses you've had before. His hand is in your hair and he's so close to you that you can feel how lanky he is, like when you hug, but you're kissing, not hugging. And his lips are moving against yours a little bit, and it makes you lose your breath, and you try to move yours back and he makes a sound that makes your stomach flip, and his other hand is on your waist and drawing you closer to him, so close that you can feel him move against you and wrap his arms tightly around you. You grab onto the collar of his shirt to pull him closer to you, making him squeak into your mouth, and before you can resetttle yourself the two of you are falling down against the wood of your floor, and you pull away and look at him with wide eyes.

"Sorry," he mumbles, his eyes equally wide.

“Sorry,” you whisper back, and he laughs, and you laugh with him. He sits up and pulls you up with him, before sliding away and sitting a little farther on the floor. You frown at that and scoot back over to him, resting your head on his shoulder and closing your eyes.

“Shouldn’t you be tutoring me in history?”

You make a mumbling sound and just keep your eyes closed, nuzzling your head against his neck.

“Oh fine, guess I’ll just study Spanish by myself.”

You feel your eyes fly open and you rush to grab your history book, opening it to a page on the Roman Empire and reading aloud from it.

“You know, I knew that would work,” Mike grins.

“Shush,” you say, “In what year did Titus rise to become the Emperor of Rome?”

“Oh come on, Jane –“

“Nope, answer the question.”

“I don’t remember.”

“That’s such a shame. Guess I get your cookie,” you say, reaching over for the chocolate chip cookie on the floor. Mike snatches it away from you quicker, and you gasp.

“You broke a rule!”

“I did not!”

“Did too!”

You both laugh for a while and continue to bicker over the cookie. Mike puts it in his mouth, though half of it is hanging out. You glare at him and lean over to kiss him, and also take the other half of the cookie.

Mike squeaks in surprise and looks at you with wide eyes. You chew

the cookie, though crumbs have fallen all over the floor so that you really didn't get that much into your mouth, and swallow.

"Ha!"

"You lost like half the cookie!"

"Whatcha going to do about it?"

He leans over and kisses you again, almost like before but not as close. Your breath escapes your body all at once.

"That," he whispers, and he's looking at you with those eyes again that make you feel like you're melting in a good way.

POUND! POUND! POUND!

You look up at the door in shock.

"You two should be STUDYING in there, not GOOFING OFF!" Hopper yells.

"Yes sir!" Mike squeaks, leaning over and grabbing his book again and burying his face in it.

"I can keep quizzing you," you offer. Mike nods, and you return to that, talking happily for the rest of the day.

If you're being honest, it's the last day you see him truly happy before everything went to shit.

NOVEMBER 7 1985

You hate Spanish with a fiery burning passion, but at least it's only one period of the day.

Every time you manage to get out of that class you're filled with a sense of extreme relief, and today is no different. You practically skip off to Gym, even though Gym is just as bad, and run down to the locker room. Max is already there, sitting on a bench and waiting for you.

“Hey,” she greets, nodding.

“Hey,” you mutter, throwing your clothes into your locker and pulling out your gym clothes.

“Oh Hop-per!”

You turn to face the girl talking to you in a sing-song voice – Renee, another Freshman who looks like she’s a Senior.

“What do you want?” you grumble.

“What’s your bra size, again?”

You glare at her.

“Why do you *care*?”

“It’s just fun to see you get all nervous about it,” Renee laughs, and all the other girls laugh with her.

You slam your locker shut and glare at her. She backs away, holding her hands up in the air.

“Don’t get all crazy on me, you whacko.”

You glare at her still until she and her friends walk away, before letting out your breath in a sigh and resting your head against the locker wall.

“She’s a bitch,” Max says simply.

You sigh again.

“I’m serious, Jane.”

“Yeah,” you mutter, “But I *am* crazy.”

“So am I. Big deal.”

You smile weakly at Max and you both go upstairs together, running around the gym and throwing balls at each other. You’ll never understand the rules of these games, but at one point during one

round when you were playing against Renee, you take the opportunity to just –

Flick –

And send the ball flying into her head. She goes down, hard, against the floor, groaning.

“Ow!”

The teacher goes running up to her, helping her off the floor while you grin from across the net. Max looks over at you, and you grin at her as she grins at you.

“Let’s get you to the nurse’s office –“

“That *freak* made me fall!”

You put on your best innocent face. The teacher looks at you suspiciously.

“She couldn’t have, she hadn’t touched the ball in ages, sir,” Max pipes up.

“Yeah,” you agree, “It was Max’s serve.”

“It was,” Renee’s friend grumbles, looking annoyed.

“So you did it?” the teacher demands.

“Not on purpose, sir,” Max says.

The teacher grunts, but then helps Renee out of the room. Her friend glares at you both.

“I don’t know *how*, but one of you weirdos sent that ball at her head,” she hisses, “So watch out.”

“I dunno man,” Max laughs, “If either one of us had some sort of magical ability to send objects flying where they shouldn’t go, you should probably be the one to watch out, right?”

The friend glares more, but the clock ticks down and everyone runs

to the locker room before more words can be said.

N O V E M B E R 1 0 1 9 8 5

The blood has gotten all over the place this time.

You're helping to clean it up, but you know you're not going to be able to get all of it, and you're overwhelmed with the iron smell filling your nose.

Mike is groaning next to you and you don't really pause to help him, you just keep cleaning up as much as you can around him. He's wrapped up his thigh with a bandage, at least, so that problem is not immediately urgent.

You finally dry up the cleaning spray off the carpet and sit back down, panting quietly and looking over at Mike.

"Sorry," Mike mumbles.

"Stop saying that," you mutter.

"I can't," Mike sobs, holding his face in his hands, "I can't stop saying I'm sorry –"

"Then... just... change the subject."

"Change the subject?" Mike demands, looking up and glaring at you through his tears, "How can I do *that*?"

"I don't know," you mutter.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles again.

You just sigh and stare at your knees.

"I can't stop saying it. It's like the word just spills out of my mouth before I can stop myself."

"Why are you sorry all the time, Mike?"

Mike frowns, looking at his hands, "I... I don't know."

“Yes, you do.”

Mike shakes his head, “I don’t.”

“Friends. Don’t. Lie.”

He looks up at you and frowns, “I... I’m sorry I exist.”

You burst into tears at that, holding your own face in your own hands and just shaking.

“I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have said that, I shouldn’t have –“

“Shut up!” you scream. Mike looks at you in shock.

“Just shut up!” you repeat, “Just shut up!”

“I’ve shut up,” Mike mumbles.

You immediately feel bad.

“I didn’t meant that – I’m sorry – I’m sorry Mike – I’m sorry –“

“Maybe you should go,” he whispers, and his voice is hoarse and his words seem hollow.

“No.”

“Jane...”

“I’m not leaving you.”

He nods, letting out a long breath.

“I’m really, really, really sorry,” you mumble, “I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“I understand why you did.”

“Well that doesn’t make it okay.”

"I forgive you."

"Thanks."

You open up your arms and pull him into a long hug as he cries into your chest. He cries and cries and cries for a long time, before sniffing and looking at you.

"I'm going to fail the class."

"No, you're not."

"I am –"

"No, you're *not*."

"But I failed the test –"

"You'll pull yourself out of it. I know you will."

"You can't *know that* –"

"I do know that."

"How?"

"Because you're Mike. You've gotten through all of this so far and you'll keep getting through it until..."

"Until?"

"Until things have gotten better. Until life is easier."

"Will it ever be?"

"It has to," you whisper.

"No it doesn't."

"Well, there's no use in thinking it won't."

Mike nods, but he doesn't look convinced. You hold onto him tighter and kiss him on the side of his head.

"Look, I know things look bad," you murmur, "I know another failed test isn't a good sign. But you can do this. We're just going to study *even more* for the next one, okay?"

"I just can't focus on it at all," Mike mumbles.

"What will help you focus?"

"I'm not sure."

You nod, frowning.

"I think I might have to study alone."

"Okay," you agree quietly.

"You help a lot, but I just get... distracted... because of you," Mike admits.

"Distracted how?" you ask softly.

"I just... I end up wanting to kiss you more than I want to study," Mike mumbles, blushing rapidly. You blush too.

"I... uh... okay," you say.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to weird you out."

"No, it's okay."

He sighs again, looking out in front of him.

"Maybe I should meet with the guidance counselor or something."

"Guidance counselor?"

"Like, a Dr. Owens for the whole school. But not as smart or in the know about how weird Hawkins is."

You laugh, "Yeah, that would be good."

Mike nods, but begins crying again, holding his face against his knees.

"I studied s-s-s-so hard, Jane! I studied so hard! How come I didn't pass?"

"I don't know," you whisper, "I don't know."

"I feel like I'll never pull myself out of this hole."

"Don't say never."

"Why not?"

"Because that's just like giving up before you even try."

"Haven't I?"

You pull him by the shoulders so that you look at him straight in the eye, "Please, Mike."

"Please what?"

"You need to keep it together. You're scaring me."

He looks at you with the same kind of eyes you'd see him have when he thought you were dead, only a little more than a year ago. Or when he was trapped in the Lab and the Demo-dogs were coming.

It breaks your heart.

"I'm sorry. I'll try to stop."

"I can't lose you."

"I can't lose you," he whispers.

"So then..."

"You won't lose me," he promises quietly.

"Thank you," you mumble.

You don't know if you believe him or not.

But friends don't lie, right?

You pull him into a long hug and just hold him, letting him cry into your shoulder as you wait for him to run out of tears.

“Talk to the Counselor,” you urge, “It’ll help.”

He nods.

“Talking to Dr. Owens is helping me so much, Mike –“

“I know,” he smiles weakly, “I’m really glad.”

“So why can’t this help you?”

“Okay, okay,” he laughs weakly, “I’ll go. I’ll set up an appointment for this week.”

You beam at him and give him a long, big kiss, making him squeak and look at you with slightly happier eyes.

“So, do you want to try to study, or just rest?”

“I can help you with Spanish... we have it this week... and I should study for that too.”

“I don’t want to make you –“

“You’re not making me.”

You nod, and the two of you pull out your books and study together until your eyes are too tired to continue.

Notes for the Chapter:

I included the fluffy stuff primarily because I know what's coming and I am paying what I owe you all in advance.

Brace yourselves.

Two chapters are coming tomorrow. Hopefully. Provided I finish. I'm working on it.

Please comment :) they're wonderful and I respond to

all of them and seriously, I need to know I'm not losing readers to the rapid updates and potential darkening of the subject matter, ha ha ha... *points hurriedly to the "ANGST WITH A HAPPY ENDING" tag before she gets pelted with tomatoes*

19. Hollow

Notes for the Chapter:

Fuckign... content warning for everything. Fuck. Just. Warning. Just a warning. Fuck. It's a warning. Warn for all. Warning. Kill Bill Sirens out of every orifice. Fuck. Just. You've been warned. You've been fucking warned. Just brace yourself. Assume you're going to be triggered. Just assume it. Fuck. Fuck. I'm sorry. Shit.

NOVEMBER 14 1985

MIKE WHEELER

Thursday is the earliest day Mr. Maybank could see you. You walk into his office nervously, sitting down in front of him and fidgeting.

“Hello, Mr. Wheeler.”

You smile at him weekly, “Uh, hi.”

Your brain is kind of spinning a little bit.

You feel... weird.

Like you’ve been walking separate from yourself for days.

This morning you couldn’t escape from a memory again – when you thought you saw Will’s body coming out of the quarry –

You couldn’t escape and you didn’t even really *feel* like you were in the present –

Your nose kept bleeding, too, which was random and weird and distressing.

It had left you feeling separate from your body for the rest of the day.

“What brings you in today?”

You take a deep breath, even though your heart is pounding so hard and fast you feel nauseous, and you just kind of want to run out of there and never look back, but you're not allowed to so here you sit, looking at the Guidance Counselor and wishing that things were different.

Wishing your whole life was different.

"Um. I'm worried about history," you mumble quietly.

"I'm going to need you to speak up."

"I'm worried about history," you say louder, wishing your heart would just calm the fuck down for maybe five seconds.

"Your performance in history class?"

You nod quietly.

"Let's see here... yes... yes Miss Ford mentioned that you were not performing adequately in the class," Mr. Maybank says, pulling out some papers and reading from them.

"Yeah... I did alright the first test but the other two I've failed," you whisper quietly.

"Yes, yes I see that here. You do alright on homework assignments though," Mr. Maybank pauses, "So what seems to be the problem?"

"I... um... I have a lot of trouble focusing."

"Focusing?"

"Yeah. On the dates and stuff. And that's a large portion of the exams in Miss Ford's class."

"Hmm, yes," Mr. Maybank writes a few things down, "Why do you have trouble focusing on the dates?"

"I can't seem to memorize them. My brain just... doesn't want to retain it."

“Do you have trouble with things like this in your other classes?”

“Not really, no. I can remember stuff for biology exams just fine, and stories and books and stuff are interesting enough that I remember the characters for those, too...”

“So it’s just history dates?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm?” you ask quietly.

“I am thinking, young man.”

“Right, sorry,” you mumble.

“Well looking at these exam scores it’s going to be very difficult for you to bring your grade up, especially since you seem to not be able to handle the course material proper.”

“Right...”

Your heart sinks into your stomach and you just want to go somewhere and cry. Preferably a bathroom. Hopefully an empty one.

“So what did you want to talk about? You seem aware of that situation.”

“I... was wondering if I could be transferred to a different class.”

“A different class?”

“I hear some other history classes don’t involve as much memorization of dates,” you whisper, “And it’s more... like, what happened, or why things happened, and stuff. I can do that part just fine, it’s why I get good grades on the homework.”

“Well, Mr. Wheeler, we can’t all pick and choose what we do in life.”

“No, but –“

“We all have to try and do different tasks as best we can.”

“Yes, but –“

“Allowing you to transfer to a different class would just be letting you avoid the problem, now, wouldn’t it?”

“Um... I guess.”

“It is a shame you’re having trouble memorizing the dates for your class, but eventually you’ll have to memorize things like dates for other classes in High School. And what kind of counselor would I be if I didn’t make you try and gain that skill now, rather than let you skate by and fail sometime in the future?”

“But... I’m not learning the skills to memorize dates.”

“Have you talked to Miss Ford about it?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“Have you tried different methods?”

“I’ve done a bunch of different stuff.”

“Is it possible that you just don’t want to study the course material?”

“I mean, I don’t want to, no, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t study. I study more for this class than I do for any of the others.”

“Hmm,” he says.

You wait, wishing your stomach would stop churning.

Or your mind would stop spinning.

Or your head would stop hurting.

“Mr. Wheeler, what are your goals?”

“My... goals?”

“Yes. What would you like to get out of your education to move

forward in a career.”

“I... haven’t thought about it.”

“Hmm.”

“I mean, I have a couple ideas of what I’d like to do, but I figured I had time to... decide all of that. Since I’m just a Freshman.”

“Well, Mr. Wheeler, I see that this failure –“

“Failure?”

“Like I said, it will be very difficult to pull your grade up in this class. You would, essentially, have to receive only A’s on the rest of the exam, and if you are unable to memorize dates as you claim –“

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t let yourself cry.

You can’t –

“I see that this failure is not a surprise based on your record.”

“Based on my... what?”

“You haven’t failed a previous class but your grades have been slipping for the past two years, compared to your performance in the sixth grade and elementary school.”

“Um, yeah...”

“And you seem to be having increased behavioral problems besides that.”

“Yeah...”

“Care to talk to me about those?”

“Um...”

Your best friend got sucked into an alternate dimension

And you and a girl who was abused her whole life had to save him

And that girl got sucked into the alternate dimension and then got chased away from you by the government who wanted to take her back to the place where she was abused

And you spent an entire year not knowing if she was alive or dead

And becoming increasingly aware that everything else sucked too from bullies to racism to antisemitism to all that stuff against gay people to sexism

And bullies kept attacking you and your friends

And then that friend who got sucked into a dimension started to act really weird and got possessed

And then a bunch of people died because they just wouldn't leave a little girl alone

And then your parents started fighting all the time

And then school was overwhelming

And...

And...

And...

“I've just. Had a lot happen. Over the past two years.”

“Yes, you’re friends with Will Byers, I believe?”

“Yeah.”

“That must have been rough.”

“It has.”

“I just don’t see how it would lead you to act out in this way.”

“I... I’m angry with how it was all handled. And the cover up from the Department of Energy with Barb. And... just... a lot of stuff makes me angry lately.”

“Hmm. Have you talked to anyone about that anger?”

“Not really.”

“It seems to me that you have it pretty good in life.”

“I – what?”

“You have a good group of friends, you have a girlfriend, you have your family and a nice house and a nice income. You aren’t wanting of anything.”

“No, but...”

“And you’re smart. I feel like you are just acting out for attention, young man.”

“I... what?”

“This is common in adolescents such as yourself. Something major happens – like losing your friend for a bit there – and you realize that you enjoy the attention and the adrenaline-inducing nature of such moments, so you try to create more of them.”

“I... that’s not what...”

“But, it’s important to realize Mr. Wheeler that wanting attention is not a substitute for being the best person you can be.”

You're just silent.

Now everything feels as though it's shattered completely.

As though all the cells inside of you have broken up and now you're just a soup of nucleic acids and protein and carbohydrates and lipids.

This isn't helping.

This isn't helping at all.

"Continuing down this path may destroy any future you decide you want yourself to have. For example, behaving in this way – yelling at teachers, getting into fights, even apparently carrying weapons at camp, it won't look good to future colleges. And neither will this failure in history."

"I... don't want to fail history."

"Do you want to go to college?"

You nod mutely.

"Well, Mr. Wheeler, I simply don't see that happening if you continue down the path you are going."

You'd be shocked by this if you had any feeling left in your body.

"Acting out, failing classes, being violent – these are not things colleges look for in prospective students."

You nod again.

"If you don't turn your behavior and performance around, then I believe you should try to consider another career path for the future."

You don't know what to say to that.

You just want to leave the room.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Not... really. Um. What will happen if I fail first semester history?"

“You’ll take the second semester but we’ll ask you to make up the first semester in the summer.”

“Got it,” you whisper, “Thank you, Mr. Maybank.”

You get up and leave the room without another word, and you don’t go to Algebra or Lit class, either. You just leave the school and start mutely walking home.

Disconnected from yourself like this, you feel like your body is being piloted by another person, and you are just watching yourself walk through the streets of Hawkins, the dead trees around you echoing how you feel from their bare branches to dead leaves to the wind whistling through them.

You know Jane will be worried about you in Literature but you just can’t turn around and go back.

After a while, you reach your house and step inside, dropping off your bag at the front of the door. You walk inside and whisper, quietly, “Mom?”

You hear footsteps and your mom walks up to you, looking at you with worry.

“Mike? What are you doing home?”

You want to cry but you can’t seem to let the tears out now.

“I... um..”

“Mike, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

You bite your lip for a minute.

“Um... I met with the... I met with... I met with the guidance counselor today.”

“Oh, what about?”

“I... I... I...”

Mom grabs you gently by the wrists and pulls you to sit down with her on the base of the stairs, looking at you straight in the eye.

“Mike, take your time. I’m listening. I’m here for you.”

You nod, swallowing, before bursting into tears and holding your face in your hands. You sob and sob and sob and sob and sob, shaking as each one escapes from your body, and Mom pulls you into a long hug as you cry.

“Just let it out. You can talk when you’re ready.”

You nod and keep crying and sniffing, shaking from head to foot and wishing that you would stop crying. Your head starts to hurt and your eyes already ache and you feel so cold and lost and like you’re broken, oh so very broken, in every part of you.

“I – I – I – I – I –”

“Deep breaths, Michael. Just take deep breaths.”

You breathe in and out but each breath is staggered and rushed as you continue to sob.

“I... I... I...”

“Shhh, shhhh,” Mom soothes, rubbing your back and looking at you with worry.

“I’m... I met with the G-G-G-G-Guidance Counselor t-t-t-today...”

“Alright.”

“He says I’m g-g-g-gonna fail history –”

“What?”

“I failed the last test, too, and he says its impossible for me to bring my g-grades up w-without a m-miracle –”

“*What?*”

“Please d-d-d-don’t be mad at m-me –”

"I'm not mad at *you*, I'm mad at him!"

"Oh."

"His job is to guide you and reassure you and help you figure out a solution, not *reprimand* you for a problem you already know you have!"

You sniffle.

"What else did he say to you?"

"That between this and my c-conduct I wasn't... I'm not... I'm not going to g-get to go to c-college..."

"The nerve of that man!"

You frown at her and keep crying, tears streaming down your face.

"I am going to call the school and give them a piece of my mind. Alright, tell me why you're having trouble with history."

You sniffle more.

You wish you felt better.

You wish your mother's words were helping.

And they are, logically.

But logic isn't the problem here.

You're a failure.

You're a complete and utter failure.

You'll never be a scientist.

You'll never go to college.

You'll never do anything with your life.

You peaked at twelve and now you're stuck in a spiral down to

shitdom.

And Jane will just have to carry you forever and you'll be a burden on her for the rest of your life.

However long that is.

"I... can't memorize the dates," you whisper.

"Hmm, yes, I understand that. Dates suck."

You laugh weakly though it's hollow.

As hollow as you.

"Well look. I'll help you study from now on, okay? And we'll get you to pass that class together. We'll work very very hard, and you can at least say you've done that, no matter what happens. And that's what matters."

"I'm an idiot," you mumble.

"No, you're not."

"But –"

"Michael, you are very, very, *very* smart. I've known that since you were a toddler. You're good at science and that's your strength. And you have a very strong sense of morality which is the only type of intelligence that actually matters."

You smile a little.

It's still hollow though.

Everything is hollow.

You are hollow.

"And being smart is not mutually exclusive with struggling at some things. You happen to struggle with historic dates and memorizing them. And that's okay! You know, that doesn't even mean you're bad at history. Plenty of history involves things that aren't dates. But you

happen to need to learn dates for this class you're taking, and that's a struggle. But we'll get through it together."

You nod mutely.

"I'm assuming you came right home after your meeting with this awful man?"

You nod again.

"Alright, well I understand. I won't drive you back to school. Go upstairs and rest. Be kind to yourself."

You nod and go upstairs.

You curl up on your bed and just hold your legs up close to your chest and try to not cry more, but you can't help it.

You bury your face in the pillow and just sob into it until you can't really cry anymore.

N O V E M B E R 2 5 1 9 8 4

"Alright Mike," Jane whispers, "Come on, let's study a little more."

"I can't focus," you mutter.

"But the next test is tomorrow..."

"I can't focus. Not with that happening downstairs."

"But..."

"I can't, okay?" you hiss, because you don't want them to hear you shouting, "I just... can't."

"Okay," Jane agrees, looking at you with her worried face.

You sneak out of the room and start creeping down the stairs to listen, Jane following you from a ways back.

"That boy is no good!"

You shiver at that and swallow, hard.

“Leave him alone, Theodore.”

“He gets into fights all the time, he constantly gets bullied by other students which means there’s something off about him –“

“*Theodore.*”

“I mean it, Karen. He’s probably a secret queer, or maybe he’s messed up in the head and we just don’t know it –“

“Theodore, stop it. I’m warning you.”

“And now he’s *failing history*?”

Your eyes widen.

You thought Mom wasn’t going to tell him.

“I can’t believe you opened that letter!” Mom shouts.

“It was addressed to both of us and I am the man of the house –“

“You should have left it to me.”

“And have you continue to hide this from me?”

“Yes!”

“He’s my son, too!”

“Is he, Ted? I don’t fucking think so.”

“What are you talking about –“

“You barely talk to him, except to hell at him. You never praise him or reassure him about his life. You don’t make any sort of effort to get to know him or encourage his interests and hobbies. And you sent him to that fucking hellhole of a camp that just made his quote-on-quote ‘behavioral problems’ even worse. So I don’t think you get to be his father anymore, regardless of the fact that he’s your biological son.”

“That makes absolutely no sense. He’s still my son.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to know the difference between literal meaning and textual nuance, Ted.”

You’ve never heard your mother be *this* scathing towards your father.

“He is a burden, on this household, on our marriage, on –“

“Our *marriage*?”

“Ever since he started acting out we’ve been having problems –“

“Yes, because you want to blame him when he’s clearly going through something!”

“Oh don’t start that again.”

“Start *what* again?”

“That in-touch with your feelings crazy people crap. Our son is not a loony, he’s a trouble maker.”

“Stop talking about him like that!”

“I can talk about our son in any way I want to.”

“Theodore, you’re a fucking piece of work.”

“What did you just say to me?”

“I said you’re a piece of work. You scream at our son. You ignore our daughters. You disrespect my culture and where I come from, and me as a person in general. When we got married we agreed. I would raise the kids, you would provide for the house, and since I’m raising them, we’d have a household in my culture’s name, with a few concessions for you. But you’ve been ignoring and disrespecting that culture from day one, and disrespecting me, and my family, and our children.”

Your dad doesn’t say anything.

“Don’t you have *anything* to say for yourself, Theodore?”

"I am just treating him like my dad treated me."

"Oh that fucking explains a lot –"

"Explains why I have had my life turn out for me and why, what, your siblings are disasters?"

"*Disasters?*"

"Your brother barely earns an income –"

"You are being absolutely ridiculous right now –"

"Well then explain to *me* why they live in that small house."

"There's more to life than income, Theodore!"

"Yes, that's why you married a successful businessman you barely knew so you could have kids with him, obviously."

"Oh my God."

"Just being honest, which you fail to be on a daily basis, Karen."

"Fuck you too."

"I do not want to hear such language from my *wife*."

"I can say whatever I fucking want!"

"Oh, no wonder our son is headed on a path straight to drugs and AIDS and being a complete and utter disappointment to our family –"

"You know what – all this crap about Michael – we're done."

"*What?*"

"We're getting a fucking divorce."

"You can't do that."

"Yes I fucking can. It's nineteen fucking eighty five."

“How will you support yourself?”

“Alimony exists, and I have other means. You are damaging for Michael and our girls too. You need to get out of the house.”

“This is my house. If you want to divorce me, fine, but you’re leaving.”

“Fine.”

“Now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You want to leave, fine, but take your no good children with you and get the *fuck out of my house!*”

You don’t even know what’s happening.

You feel like everything is shattering around you.

“Fine!”

You watch from the stairs as your mom walks over, looking up and seeing you.

“Michael, please start packing your things. Just the essentials. Theodore, I expect you’ll send along the rest of our belongings? We cannot possibly pack everything in one night.”

“Fine.”

“Jane, it was nice to see you again, but –“

“I’ll help,” Jane whispers behind you.

“Thank you.”

“Where are we even going to go, mom?” Nancy whispers, looking pale and coming out of her room.

“We’ll go to Zayde and Bubbe’s until I’ve come up with another plan. Come on, pack your things. I’ll call you sick from school tonight.”

Nancy nods and runs back into her room. You walk, as though someone else is piloting your body, into your room and start stuffing things into your backpack.

“Michael, I have a suitcase you can use,” Mom says suddenly. You turn around to see her hauling a suitcase into the room, and you grab it mutely. Jane helps you start stuffing clothing and a few other things into the suitcase, not saying anything to you, just helping.

You drag your bags downstairs and look over at Jane, who looks like she’s going to cry.

You don’t see your father. You assume he’s sleeping on his chair.

“The car is in my name, Theodore,” Karen shouts.

“Fine.”

Karen’s holding Holly on her hip and has a few bags with her as well. Nancy comes running down the stairs with two bags, looking at you with worry.

“Jane, would you like a ride home?”

“Um...”

“it’s no trouble.”

“I...”

“Speak up, please. We have to get going.”

You still haven’t reconnected with yourself.

“I’d like to stay with Mike... he’s... not... he’s going to be in...”

“Hmm. I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that.”

“We’ve... had sleep overs before.”

“Yes, but the house we’re going to is crowded –“

“Please, mom,” you whisper hoarsely, “It... nothing inappropriate

will happen. Please. Please, mom.”

“Alright, fine. Theodore, can I give Chief Hopper a call before we leave?”

“Make it quick.”

“Fine.”

You watch as your mom goes into the kitchen and starts talking quietly on the phone. You don’t really hear the words she says, it’s like there’s a ringing in your ears.

A loud, endless ringing.

You feel like you’re falling...

Falling...

Falling...

Falling...

And you can’t stop...

“Alright.”

You snap back.

“Jane can stay with you overnight. Come on, let’s go.”

You all pile into the car and you just sit in the back, pressing your face against the window and staring out of it.

“Mike?” Jane whispers, but you don’t answer her.

You don’t really know what to say.

The car pulls up to a small, but nice house and everyone piles inside. You follow your mom wordlessly as she goes to talk to Zayde and Bubbe.

“Good fucking riddance,” Zayde hisses.

“David –“

“I’m sorry, but I’m also not.”

“I think the kids just need to go to sleep, Dad,” Karen sighs.

“Yes, of course. Good to see you again, Jane.”

Jane nods next to you.

“Alright, well you two and Nancy can sleep in the guest room here,” Zayde says, opening the door to another room. There are two twin beds in there.

“Holly you can sleep with Karen in this room –“

You aren’t listening anymore, you just go walk up to the bed near the window and lie down on it. You stare out the window, not saying anything, not being connected to yourself.

You feel the bed shift and don’t even react when you feel an arm go around your waist, you just lie there.

It’s nice, though.

To feel Jane’s breathing against you.

The feeling eventually lulls you to sleep, though it’s not a very restful one.

N O V E M B E R 2 8 1 9 8 5

“Michael, I understand you’re not feeling well, still, but we’re all headed over to your Aunt Olivia’s house.”

You just shake your head, burying your face in your pillow.

You have had a lot of trouble moving these days.

And you missed Wednesday as well as Tuesday because you couldn’t get out of bed and really you would have missed today too if it weren’t a holiday and you had school off anyway.

Shit

Failing a class – and now you're really failing, because you missed the last test, and yeah sure you were called in sick, but what are the odds that you'd be able to pass a make up test when you're like this

And acting out in school and getting into fights with anyone who even looks at Jane slightly the wrong way or makes fun of Will for *any* reason and constantly getting in trouble with teachers for doing it

And getting bullied by all those stupid dicks at school for being who you are and having your curly hair pulled on or your nose mocked or getting Holocaust jokes shoved in your face and getting pushed to the ground and all that awful stuff

And now your parents were divorcing because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you, because of you

Because

Of

You

All your fault

All your fault

All your fault

All your fault

All your fault

You sit up and hold your head in your hands and sob into them, just shaking madly and trying to breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

But everything is crushing around you.

You feel like you're crushing inside of yourself.

And you just wish the world would stop spinning.

You just wish *you* would stop spinning.

You just wish.

You just wish.

You just wish you were different.

You just wish you weren't yourself.

You just wish that your life had gone another way.

That life in general could go another way.

That it was possible for the world to be good.

But it's not.

Everything is awful.

Nothing is ever going to get better.

You are doomed

You are doomed

You are doomed

You peaked at twelve

And now you're going to fail history

And you're going to flunk out of school

And never go to college

And be a burden on Jane forever

And be a burden on your mom forever

And your friends

And Nancy

And everyone around you

Everyone

The whole party

You aren't a paladin

You're a deadweight

Just a fucking corpse that they drag with them through everything
and have to keep track of as everything goes to shit around you

Worst possible thing to have, really, when everything is falling apart,
like it doubtlessly will again

And God forbid something happens again

It doesn't seem to have this year yet but you never fucking know

Things could come back in the future

And then what would you be?

Deadweight

You're a deadweight

Useless, awful

Awful deadweight

Worthless

Useless

Terrible

Awful

Piece of shit

Piece of shit

Piece of shit

Burden

Burden

Burden

Burden

Burden on everyone around you

No one needs you

No one *wants* you

That's why you're alone

Not because you isolated yourself

But because they're all relieved you're not with them

Everyone, relieved

Even Jane

Jane must also be relieved

She loves you but eventually she's going to realize that's a mistake

That her love was a mistake

That *you're* a mistake

That you are the biggest mistake

That you've always been a mistake

And that she could just have so much better of a life without you

She *will* have a better life without you

Everyone could have a better life without you

You could be better without you.

Everything has been ringing, but the ringing stops, snaps back into place.

You get up, walk to your backpack, and pull out a piece of paper. You write on it, though your hand is shaking madly – so madly you feel like the words won't actually be able to be read, *I'M SORRY*.

It's all you can really say.

What more is there?

You put the piece of paper down next to you and lie down on your floor.

You take a deep breath.

And another.

And another.

And another.

You think of Jane's face.

How beautiful she looked at the Snow Ball.

Or when you first saw her again.

And how she made your heart flip in your chest.

She's too good for you.

Much, much, *much* too good.

And you're sorry you ever found her.

You're sorry you're the one she latched herself to.

You're sorry.

You're sorry.

You're sorry.

You're sorry.

You take out your razor and do the deed, even though it stings, even though it hurts.

You put down the razor and don't look at the blood. You don't look at it at all.

You just think of Jane's face.

You just think of her smiling.

Kissing her.

Dancing with her.

Waking up next to her and seeing her and smiling at her.

You just want the last thing you think about to be her.

That's your final wish.

And it's the last thing you think of as you fade into blackness.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright:

Take a break.

Take a breath.

Take a drink of water.

Eat something, preferably comfort food.

Leave a non-threatening comment.

Then read the next chapter before you try to kill me.

20. Step Two

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for the same shit as last time. Just fuck. Fuck fuck. Fuckity. Fuck fuck. Fuuuuuck. Me.

N O V E M B E R 2 8 1 9 8 5

J A N E H O P P E R

“Jane, come on, eat your mashed potatoes.”

You shake your head, frowning down at the plate.

Hopper groans and holds his face in his hands.

“Have you eaten at all the past few days, sweetie?” Mrs. Byers asks, looking at you across the table.

“Some,” you mutter.

“You can’t do anything to help Mike right now, he’s at his family’s thanksgiving,” Will whispers.

“Do you want me to go and call Nancy? She gave me the number of where they’d all be,” Jonathan offers.

“No...” you mumble.

“I’m sorry, I just wanted her to have a normal Thanksgiving,” Hopper groans, “I didn’t mean to ruin all of yours –”

“No, no, it’s fine Hop,” Mrs. Byers mutters, “Jane, what can we do to help? You have to talk to us.”

“I’m just... worried,” you whisper.

“We all are,” Mrs. Byers nods.

“Divorce is a tough thing to get through,” Jonathan agrees.

“For everyone,” Hopper reassures.

You swallow, “I think... I think it’s more than that. He hasn’t... he told me he hasn’t left his bed for a few days, not more than... than he needs to.”

“That is worrisome,” Mrs. Byers sighs.

“I... should... um...”

“I’ll call Nancy and see if he’s at Thanksgiving, okay?” Jonathan asks.

“Can’t you visit him?” Will asks.

“I don’t think I can right now,” you mumble, “I’m too... upset.”

Will nods and pats you on the shoulder.

“Hey Nancy, just wondering about Mike – oh – oh I see – is he at... yeah, okay. I think Jane wants to – yeah it’s a good idea. Okay. Thanks. Bye.”

Jonathan hangs up and peers around the corner at you all.

“Apparently he didn’t go with them all. He’s back at the house,” Jonathan explains.

“Can I go get him?” you ask quietly.

“Yeah, kid, I’ll drive you over there,” Hopper says. You get up and go with him to the car, just staring out the window.

“Kid, I know you’re worried, but you can’t... you can’t put this all on yourself.”

“Why not?” you ask quietly.

“Because you’re a kid,” Hopper whispers, his voice hoarse, “And... and you have your own troubles.”

You nod, and continue to stare out the window.

You pull up to the house and run up to knock on the door. You knock

on it multiple times, but no one comes to it.

“Mike?” you shout.

There’s no answer.

Hopper frowns.

“Kid? It’s us, we just want to see you,” Hopper shouts.

Still no answer.

You unlock the door with your mind, and swing it open.

“Jane...” Hopper sighs. You don’t listen to him, you just run inside and run to his room.

And you scream.

He’s passed out – you hope he’s passed out –

So much blood –

So much blood –

So much blood –

So much –

“Fuck,” Hopper shouts.

You dive to his side and start sobbing, trying to stop the long slits in his arms from bleeding anymore.

“Kid, Kid –“

You hold onto his arms and feel blood all over your hands and you can’t stop sobbing and you can’t see anymore because your eyes are clouded with tears and –

“JANE, *MOVE*.”

You’re being shoved aside and you scream, grabbing hold of

something – a piece of paper – and you try to wipe the tears away from your eyes but you just get Mike’s blood all over you instead, but you don’t care, and you can’t stop screaming –

“Okay he’s still alive. Jane I need you to move *out of the way*.”

You roll over and keep screaming, burying your face in the carpet and holding yourself tightly.

“Yeah, yeah it’s me, I know it’s thanksgiving shut the *FUCK UP*. We have a suicide attempt at 723 East Wilmet –“

You keep screaming and you reach out for Mike’s shoulders, and you still can’t really see so you reach blindly, and you shake him and he’s limp –

“MIKE –“

“Yes, RIGHT AWAY –“

“MIKE –“

“Okay, thank you. Fuck.”

“MIKE –“

“Jane, Jane calm down –“

“MIKE –“

You feel yourself being picked up and you scream, you hit Hopper, you hit him and hit him and hit him and hit him and you hit him as he drags you away and you start to hear sirens outside.

“I’ve got to call Joyce to get Jonathan to call –“

“LET ME GO – MIKE –“

“Jane, *please* –“

“MIKE, MIKE, MIKE –“

“JANE”

You keep scream and screaming as you hear people running into the house and you can hear machines and things being moved around and you scream –

“Jane, Jane, breathe –“

“Sir, does your daughter require –“

“Get the damn blood off of her!”

“Yes, yes sir –“

You’re being taken by another person and you scream even more, flailing around and you scream so loudly and –

Crash –

“What the hell?”

“Oh fuck,” Hopper shouts.

“Sir we have half of our machines broken –“

“Just get him inside the ambulance and start the transfusion immediately –“

“Chief, please move out of the way –“

Hopper pulls you from whoever was holding you and drags you over to another spot, and you keep screaming, and you can’t think anymore –

“Jane, Jane, please, please breathe, please calm down –“

“Miss, they’ve got him, he’s going to be okay.”

You just scream and cry in response and curl up, holding your self into a ball.

“We’ll take her too –“

“I’ll drive her myself.”

“Yes, sir.”

You feel yourself being moved and put into a car seat and you just keep sobbing.

“Jane, *please use your shirt* to wipe off your face.”

You weakly reach to do that, pulling your shirt up to wipe everything down. Hopper doesn’t make a comment about it, just drives behind the ambulance.

You blink and you can see again. You look and see the ambulance, with the flashing lights and the blaring sirens, driving quickly through Hawkins.

You sniffle, but you’re out of tears now.

“H... Hopper?”

“Yeah, kid?” Hopper asks quietly.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“You heard the paramedic.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I hope so,” Hopper answers quietly.

You start crying even more, and you place your head in your hands again.

“Jane –“

“He lied to me.”

“He, what?”

“He said I wouldn’t lose him.”

“Well, you haven’t.”

“But he still tried.”

Hopper sighs.

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“But friends don’t lie.”

“I don’t think he was lying.”

“But –“

“I think he didn’t think he’d be capable of this. I think he believed what he was saying. And right now he’s going to need you, kid. He’s going to need you to help himself get better.”

You nod, tears still streaming from your eyes.

Your head hurts.

“But kid, make me a promise, okay?”

“What?”

“Just. Don’t let yourself. Don’t... don’t sacrifice your own health, okay? Don’t ignore your own problems to help him. You have issues, too, and I don’t want you to get to where he is.”

You nod quietly.

“I’ll try.”

“Thank you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Jane.”

The car pulls up to the Hospital and you jump out of it, running after Hopper as he goes up to a big place marked EMERGENCY.

“Yes, we were following the ambulance – kid attempted suicide – name is Mike Wheeler –“

“Yes Chief, can you enter some of his information –“

"I'll write in what I can. Can the kid see him?"

"I'm sorry, but no, they're treating him now."

"Okay."

You sit down in a chair and hold your face in your hands, crying heavily into them, trying to breathe and finding yourself not doing so properly.

"Sweetie?"

You look up to see a woman in pink clothing looking down at you.

"Hi, I'm Nurse Redfield. Do you need anything?"

You just sniffle.

"Yeah, her boyfriend's in there, she's shaken up," Hopper mutters quietly.

"Oh no!" the nurse says, "Here, one moment. I'll go get you a blanket."

You frown.

You're not cold.

But she brings over the blanket and drapes it over your shoulders.

The weight of it is comforting.

You breathe slowly, in and out, in and out, in and out, in and out.

"Jane?"

You look up at Hopper.

Actually look at him.

His face is as pale as snow and he looks like he's going to throw up.

"I'm going to go make a couple of calls. I need to get in touch with

his mother, and of course Joyce, and I want to call the doc.”

“Doctor... Owens?”

“Yeah. I don’t want Mike staying with just any quack.”

You frown, “But his mom –“

“It might be time to tell his mom everything that happened. That’s not the point. Are you going to be okay here?”

You nod mutely.

“Alright. Just stay calm, the nurses will tell you what they can.”

You nod again and he goes off to a payphone in the corner.

You pull the wadded up piece of paper from your hands. It’s covered in blood. Your hands are covered in blood. Your arms and shirt and probably still your face are all –

Blood –

So much blood –

You open it up and read in shaky letters *I’M SORRY*.

You start sobbing again, holding your face in your hands and just crying and crying and crying and crying –

You need to see Mike.

You need to see Mike *right now*.

You get up and wipe off your eyes, wandering up to the desk. The woman looks at you sadly.

“Hello Jane.”

You sniffle, “Can I please –“

“I’m sorry, you can’t.”

You glare at her, “*Please.*”

“It’s not allowed, kid.”

You walk back, wrapping your arms tightly across your chest as you stumble into a seat.

You see doctors and other people running in and out of two double doors.

You look back over and see that Hopper is still on the phone.

You look over at the receptionist office and flick your head, and a bunch of papers come tumbling out of cabinets.

“Oh, geez –” the woman says, and you immediately scurry over to the doors, opening them and running through before anyone can see.

You then crouch against the wall and close your eyes, trying to focus even though your mind is spinning –

Spinning –

Spinning –

But you only have one thought.

You only have one person you need to see.

Mike.

You find him.

You get up and you run through all the rooms until you find the one you need, and you slip inside.

There are a lot of doctors, and they are all moving quickly around Mike. Some are working on his arms, others are finagling with blood that they’re putting into him, and others are doing other things that you don’t understand.

You crouch behind a bench and wait, breathing quietly.

“BP seems stable –“

“Almost finished here –“

“Someone should go out and tell the family what’s going on.”

“Family isn’t here yet I think.”

“Who called him in, then?”

“The Chief.”

“Goodness.”

“I need to go and get – hey!”

You look up to see a doctor staring down at you.

“What are you doing in here?”

“I want to see Mike,” you mutter angrily.

“The fuck, kid, who let you in here –“

“Myself.”

“Jesus we must have forgotten to lock the door.”

“Someone escort her out.”

“No!” you scream, glaring, “No.”

“You can’t be in here, kid –“

“No!” you scream again, and you run past them all to go to Mike. He’s still passed out, but he has more color in his cheeks and his arms aren’t bleeding anymore.

“Where is she –“

“Right here, Chief –“

“NO!” you scream at Hop, but you’re being picked up anyway, “NO,

NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO –“

“Jane, calm down!”

“NO!” you scream again, and you keep screaming it until you’re being carried outside, and suddenly you’re on a bench.

You feel Hopper pulling your face into your chest as you just keep whimpering No, No, No, No, until your throat is too dry to talk any further.

N O V E M B E R 2 9 1 9 8 5

Mike finally wakes up the next day.

You aren’t at the Hospital when it happens. They eventually kick out non-family visitors and you aren’t family.

You hate that because it’s *wrong* but they won’t *listen*.

But Hop drives you over quickly, not really saying anything as he pulls up to the Hospital. You just run inside, and wait impatiently until you finally reach the room.

“Okay, just, try to be calm. He’s recovering,” Hopper mutters. You nod as the door opens and you run inside.

His whole family is there, and he’s lying in a bed. He looks tired and weak and pale, but he’s alive, his eyes are open, he’s breathing, and he looks at you, and he looks so upset your heart breaks for the millionth time.

You rush over to him and throw your arms around him, sobbing into shoulder harder than you’ve sobbed before.

“Jane, let him breathe,” Hopper mutters.

“No, it’s alright,” Karen sighs.

You pull away and wipe off your eyes, sniffing heavily and trying to not cry anymore. Mike looks at you and he’s crying too, not saying anything yet.

"Thanks for coming so quickly," Nancy mutters near you. You nod.

"Um, I know you probably want to stay here, mom, but maybe we should give them a minute alone," she continues. Mrs. Wheeler nods and everyone leaves the room, except Mike, who is still looking at you like that.

"Mike," you whisper, and it's all you can say.

You rush forward and hold him again, and he wraps his arms around you, and you cry into his shoulder and just stay here, sobbing, unable to really get yourself to stop.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"Please never say that again," you mumble.

"What?"

You pull out, shaking, the piece of paper from your pocket, covered in blood and tears. You flatten it out and show it to him, more tears leaking from your eyes.

"Oh," Mike whispers.

"Please, please, *please* stop saying that."

"What do I say instead?"

"Anything else."

"Okay."

You take a deep breath and start pacing the room, holding your head in your hands. Mike watches you, still with that facial expression, still looking like death.

Well.

That makes sense.

"Say something," he begs quietly.

You turn to look at him.

“Why didn’t you call me first?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbles, “I... I was caught.”

“Caught?”

“My thoughts wouldn’t stop spiraling. Ever since... ever since they decided to get divorced. They keep spiraling and I blame myself and I’m. I’m. I couldn’t escape. I couldn’t think clearly. I couldn’t get myself to stop.”

“Okay,” you whisper.

“And I thought I was doing you a favor.”

“A *FAVOR*?”

“I see that I was wrong,” he mumbles.

You take a deep breath.

“Why did you think you were... why?”

“Because I think I’m a burden.”

You rush over to him and hold his face in your hands, looking at him and trying to not cry.

“You’re not a burden, Mike. You’re not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“I’m s-... okay.”

“Please believe me.”

“I do.”

“Thank you.”

You’re still holding his face and you’re still looking at him and you’re still trying really really really hard to not cry anymore but you know you’re not going to be able to hold it in and you just –

You start sobbing, and Mike holds you tightly, and you just rest on him for a long while, wishing that you never had to let go.

D E C E M B E R 4 1 9 8 5

“Hey Hopper!”

You turn around, slowly, glaring at the boy as he walks up you. You are too tired for this and you don’t know why Hopper is making you go to school, except for that you’ve already missed two days this week and you know full well that you will be in trouble if you miss any more, really.

But you’re too tired to be here.

You’re too tired to be much of anywhere, really.

“What do you want?” you snap.

“How’s your crazy boyfriend?”

“Alive,” you mutter.

“I heard he almost wasn’t.”

“Shut up.”

“He’s insane, you know that right?”

“Shut *up*.”

“Real loony!”

“Shut up shut up shut up shut up!”

“Make me!”

You shove him, but physically you are quite weak, so he laughs and he shoves you back. You fall to the ground and hit your head on a locker and it hurts, a lot, but you glare at him and he trips.

“Ahh!”

He looks at you with wide eyes.

“How’d you –“

“Leave me the fuck alone,” you hiss, and you get up and start running through the hallways.

And you bump right into a teacher.

“Miss Hopper.”

You look up and grimace, gulping a little bit.

“Fighting in the hallways again?” the teacher asks. You nod mutely.

“Come on. We’ll have to talk to the Principal about this.”

You nod and follow, just wishing things could be simple for maybe five seconds of your entire life.

You get detention, and you aren’t really surprised about this anymore, so you serve it without really complaining that much.

You’re just... so tired.

So, so, so tired.

“Jane,” Hopper says angrily when you get into the car with him afterwards.

“Yes,” you grunt angrily.

“What have we talked about.”

“No using my powers at school.”

“Exactly,” he says, letting out a few coughs, “Look, I get that things are rough right now –“

“Rough?”

“Okay, fine, they’re horrible –“

“They’re more than horrible. My boyfriend tried to kill himself and I got covered in his blood trying to save him.”

“But he’s alive.”

You grunt in anger.

“And he’s with Dr. Owens.”

You grunt again.

“And Dr. Owens is already starting to help him.”

You let out a third grunt.

“And Karen knows... everything now.”

You sigh.

“So now he’ll have an adult at home to help him.”

You just hold your face in your hands.

“Everything is overwhelming and awful.”

“I know, kid.”

You continue to drive in silence for a long time.

“I just... know you haven’t been able to get that whole behavioral problem thing under control since we last talked.”

“Yeah,” you mutter.

“And now I feel like it’s only going to get worse.”

“Yup.”

“I just... be careful. Try to not use your powers.”

“I’ll try,” you mumble.

“Eventually someone’s going to figure it out.”

“Yeah.”

“And then where will we all be?”

“In trouble.”

“Exactly.”

You just keep staring out the window, not even knowing what to think about.

D E C E M B E R 8 1 9 8 5

“How’s Mike doing?”

“Okay.”

Will looks worried, sitting with you as you listen to the Sex Pistols, the loud music reverberating through you and helping you to just, briefly, forget who you are and what you’re doing and everything that’s been happening to you.

You let out a longer sigh.

“I mean, I think Dr. Owens is helping.”

“But it hasn’t been that long.”

“Exactly.”

Will frowns and lies back on his bed, looking up at the ceiling.

“What is it?” you ask.

Will frowns more, “I just remember... the past year for me, you

know? Two years, really.”

“Yeah...”

“Everything’s been rough. Really rough. And like, it’s not just the shadow monster or my connection to the upside down. That’s terrible, but if it were just that I’d be able to get over it faster.”

“It’s your memories,” you offer quietly.

“Exactly. I can’t stop remembering them, sometimes,” Will admits.

“Little things will just make you think about stuff?”

“Exactly. And then I’ll get trapped into thinking about it for a while.”

You nod.

You know the feeling.

“But I’m glad I’ve been working on it. Talking to Dr. Owens has actually helped since, ya know, the gate was closed and my connection to the Upside Down broken. And Art Therapy was *so good* for me last summer. And I’m just glad everything’s back to normal... well...” he sighs, “Close to it.”

You nod again.

“I think I... need to work on all that.”

“Dealing with memories?”

“Yeah...”

“Have you talked to Dr. Owens about it?”

“Only a little bit.”

“How come?”

“I’m just... nervous about talking about it, I guess. And we mostly discuss my dyslexia and dealing with that for school.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

You both sit and listen to the music together, bobbing your heads quietly.

“When are you going to see him again?”

“In a week,” you grumble, “Well, less. Next Saturday.”

“That’s nice though, right?”

“Yeah. I just want to see him more.”

“I know, but Dr. Owens must know what he’s doing, right?”

“I guess...”

“And we have school.”

You laugh before you can stop yourself.

“Right. School.”

Everything seems so stupid now.

With Mike...

And how you miss him, every day, without him in the halls with you...

“You’re not, like, giving up, are you?” Will asks worriedly.

“No,” you mumble, “I’m just... I dunno. It’s hard.”

“Yeah,” Will agrees.

“Thank you for listening to music with me though,” you whisper.

“Of course. Any time,” he smiles, and you go back to listening together, you just wishing you could disappear into the lyrics.

DECEMBER 14 1985

The lab is quiet, because it's a Saturday.

It's a different lab than the Lab, and there are a lot of different people here, including ones who have no idea who you are or what the Upside Down is.

You walk quietly through the halls to the room where Mike is staying, knocking and entering when you hear his voice.

"Ah, Jane! Good to see you," Dr. Owens greets.

"Hi," you mumble quietly.

"I'll just pack up my things here and you and Mike can chat. I forgot visiting hours were starting. Do you both need anything?" Dr. Owens asks.

"Um... how long can she stay today?" Mike mutters.

"You know what, why doesn't she stay until the evening? Then you can use the Menorah and light the last candle together."

"Thanks," Mike says, smiling for real, and Dr. Owens nods before leaving. You walk over to sit next to him on his bed.

"They let you have a Menorah in here?" you ask him softly.

"An electric one, and I have to use it supervised. But I feel like you'll count as supervision, especially for Dr. Owens," Mike smiles weakly.

You lean over and kiss him on the cheek, "How is it going?"

"Better," Mike says, "Every day is just a little better."

"That's all we can hope for."

Mike nods.

"The divorce is moving forward."

"I thought you weren't supposed to hear about that at all?"

"I'm not, but I asked anyway, and Nancy told me."

“Oh.”

“I’m glad.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. My dad is a dick who made me hate myself.”

You nod.

“I’m not saying this is all his fault, because... because I don’t want to pretend like my mind isn’t... like my mind is fucked up. But... but he didn’t make it easier.”

“No, he didn’t,” you agree.

“Nothing made it easier,” Mike mumbles.

You nod with him, “Don’t think about that right now.”

“I have to think about it occasionally.”

“Okay...”

“I mean, like... one of the things Dr. Owens talked to me about was avoidance behavior. He says that... that people’s feelings should be respected, and that, like, if someone isn’t ready to discuss something yet they shouldn’t be made to. But you also shouldn’t avoid discussing something forever, because that’s unhealthy. So I was avoiding discussing how awful I felt, because I knew starting school was stressful for you, and I didn’t want to make anyone worried about me. I just pretended I was more fine than I was.”

You nod silently.

“And that just made me bottle it all up and then I just... with the failing and the divorce... it all exploded, you know?”

“Yeah,” you say softly.

“And... can I just say one thing?” he whispers quietly.

“Okay...”

"I'd like to apologize."

"Mike –"

"No, I'm not going to use the s-word. I'm trying to be... I need to say it. But I'm not being... I'm not hating myself and that's making me say it, okay? I promise."

You nod weakly.

"I am apologizing for not telling you how bad I was. You knew I was hurting myself, and that I was upset, but you didn't know the extent, or how much I hated myself, or anything like that. And that wasn't fair to you. I didn't want to hurt you, but I ended up hurting you more by not being open with you. And I hope you can forgive me," Mike says softly.

"Mike, I already have."

Mike looks at you sadly, "I know."

You sit in silence together, you just leaning over to rest your head on his shoulder. He rests his head on top of yours and you sit there like that in silence for a long while, breathing and taking in each other.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Promise me you'll talk to me if this happens again."

"I promise."

"I don't want any more secrets."

"We can't have *no* secrets."

"I know, just... I want to minimize them."

"Okay. I can do that."

"Thank you," you smile weakly. He looks over at you and leans in to kiss you softly, and you sigh into his mouth happily, and you keep

kissing him, the two of you moving your lips slowly against each other as you sit on the bed together. He wraps his arms around you and you wrap yours around him, pulling yourself as close together as you can. He makes another one of those sounds that make your heart pound extra super fast, and you feel a little weak everywhere as a result.

He pulls away from you and rests his forehead on yours, his eyes closed. You close yours too, and just rest there with him, enjoying the two of you breathing in slow unison.

“Jane?”

“Yeah, Mike?”

“I love you.”

You smile.

“I love you too.”

He leans in and kisses you again, and you kiss him back, and you’re feeling happy again for the first time since long before he even tried to kill himself.

It’s so nice it makes you feel warm all over.

The good kind of warm, the kind of warm that makes you feel like maybe you can get through all of this.

“Mike?” you whisper softly.

“Yeah?”

“We’re still married, right?”

He bursts out laughing, and the sound gives you even more of that warm feeling.

“Yeah, of course. We never stopped.”

“Just making sure.”

“Why?”

“Haven’t talked about it since it happened.”

“Well, we are.”

He looks at you, blushing furiously and smiling a little bit, “Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah?”

He swallows, “I’ve... I’ve gotten close to that dark place a lot.”

“I figured.”

“I usually can pull myself back from it.”

“Make sense.”

“You... you want to know what has helped a lot?”

“What?”

“You.”

“Me? But you’re always worried about me –“

“Yeah, ‘cause I love you.”

You smile a little.

“But you also... I dunno. I was already in a very dark place when we met and everything. Will disappearing didn’t help, like, at all. But meeting you... seeing how good of a person you are despite everything that happened to you... how curious, and funny, and sweet, and smart you are... you’re like a light in the darkness, you know?”

You smile at him weakly, blushing furiously.

“And I’m s – I wish I hadn’t forgotten that so quickly on Thanksgiving.”

"It's okay, Mike," you murmur, "We all have those moments."

Mike smiles back a little bit and sighs, "Yeah. I just don't want to have one again."

"I'm glad."

"I mean it. I don't want to die."

"Thank you."

"I don't want to hurt you or Mom or Nancy or Holly or Zayde or Bubbe or Will or Dustin or Lucas or Max or Steve or Hopper or Mrs. Byers or Jonathan again. I really really don't."

"Do you and Dr. Owens talk about how you'll stop yourself if you get there again?"

"Yeah. We've mostly been unpacking how I got to that point and how I can talk myself out of it, or things I can do to get someone else to help me, if I ever get there again."

"That's good."

"I'm just... tired of being stuck here," he admits.

"I'm tired of you being stuck here, too. When will you get out?"

"When he thinks I can be trusted to not hurt myself again. And that means *at all*. I'm not... allowed to cut myself like normal anymore either."

"Oh. That's good."

"Yeah. I'm sure I'll slip up, but I have to be harder on myself if I do. I was too lenient before."

"I was too."

"Maybe a little. But we're fourteen and you don't want to make me upset. No one can blame you if you don't want to yell at me."

You smile weakly, "Thanks."

"And it shouldn't be on you to get me to stop this. It's my life and my body. I have to... I have to be hard on myself."

"Well I'll still try to help."

"Thanks," he murmurs, smiling weakly at you.

"How's your mom doing?"

"Waiting to talk about everything until I'm better."

"Makes sense."

"She's still nice to you, right?"

"Yeah, very."

"Good."

You sit there and talk for a long while more, and kiss for even more, too.

You don't talk about how you have nightmares about finding him covered in his own blood.

Or about not being able to stay with him as the doctors all took him away.

Or about reading the 'I'M SORRY' on a piece of paper and feeling like the words clawed out your heart from your chest.

He doesn't need to know any of that.

You don't want to make him worse.

Eventually Dr. Owens comes in with an electric Menorah, and Mike lights it with you and mumbles blessings softly under his breath. You stand with him, looking at the lights as the almost moonless night sky hangs above you, dark and infinite.

"That's what this holiday's all about, you know," Mike murmurs softly.

“About... what?”

“Light. In the darkness. It’s called the Festival of Lights.”

“Oh,” you smile. You like that.

“And it’s also about not assimilating but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

You laugh a little.

“But yeah. Light in darkness,” Mike pauses, “I’m glad... to be getting a little light.”

You squeeze his hand tightly, just staring at the lights together.

All you needed was just a little bit of light.

E N D P A R T T W O

Notes for the Chapter:

Phew.

Got through that.

I'm not saying this is "rock bottom" because there's definitely some other dark moments in this story but this is probably the darkest? I dunno. But it's definitely the last suicide attempt so congratulations on that my dudes.

Take a breather. Take care of yourself. Eat something you like and drink some water.

And please comment because that was fucking rough to write > > fuck. Fuuuuuck. Fuck.

Also the plumbing went bad at my apartment so today's been a Fun Day.

21. Next to Normal

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for references to self harm & suicide attempt; and depictions of vomit

PART THREE

JANUARY 4 1986

MIKE WHEELER

You like stepping outside into the sun.

Yeah, it's cold outside, and you haven't left the building for over a month.

But you're glad to be outside again.

"Now okay, you have my phone number to call if you need me, right?" Dr. Owens asks as he leads you outside.

"Yes," you nod quietly, looking around and finding your Mom standing by the car.

"Alright. We'll see each other again next week for our first appointment."

"Yes Doctor Owens."

"And please don't hesitate to reach out for help if you find yourself getting overwhelmed- "

"Yes, Doctor Owens," you repeat, feeling antsy.

You just want to go home now.

"Alright, well good luck."

You nod at him, before scurrying over to Mom.

“Ready to go?” she asks. You nod and get into the car, breathing fresh air and looking out the window as the trees and sky pass by.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” you admit quietly.

“That’s good.”

More silence.

“I want to ask you just one question. Is that alright?”

“Yeah, Mom, sure.”

“Were you ever going to tell me about the Upside-Down?”

You sigh heavily.

“Probably not.”

“Alright. That’s all for now.”

“Will we talk more about this later?”

“When you’re ready.”

You nod, and keep staring out the window as you pull up to Bubbe and Zayde’s. With all of the chaos of the divorce and you being committed, she hadn’t tried to look for her own house yet.

“Alright, come on. Let’s get inside,” Mom insists. You nod again and get out of the car, bringing your bag with you as you walk up into the house.

Everything is dark, so you reach to turn on the lights.

“SURPRISE!”

You jump in shock as everyone jumps out from behind chairs, from Jane and Nancy to Max and Lucas and Jonathan and everyone. Jane runs up to you and hugs you tightly, making your heart leap.

“What... is all this?” you ask, smiling weakly as Jane pulls back from you slowly, looking up at you and smiling weakly back.

“Your welcome home party, zeisele,” Bubbe murmurs, walking forward and pulling you into a long hug. You hug her back tightly as everyone starts crowding around you and chatting, looking at you with those faces that mean they’re trying to hide their worry.

“Okay Mike now that you’re out we need you to settle a dispute for us,” Dustin says eagerly, running up to you and grinning. Lucas follows him, rolling his eyes.

“Really, this is the first thing you –“

“Shush let me live. So we’re debating what we think would make a good Star Wars prequel.” Dustin continues, “I say it’s finding out where Luke and Leia come from and how Anakin turned into Darth Vader –“

“Whereas I say that it’s just the clone wars in general and that it shouldn’t focus on a Skywalker again,” Lucas grunts.

You grin a little at them.

You’re glad that they’re just treating you normally right away.

“Um... I dunno. I think the two would probably factor into each other a lot?” you say.

“Yeah, that’s what *I’m* saying,” Jane mutters.

“But the movies would have to focus on one or the other – clone wars or Anakin’s life – and I would prefer it just focus on the universe of the Republic!” Lucas shouts.

“And I want to know how Obi-Wan’s apprentice ended up Darth freaking Vader!” Dustin responds.

“I mean it’s not like these movies would be made anyway,” Max says dismissively.

“You shut your mouth,” Dustin says, pointing at her.

“Bite me,” Max sticks her tongue out at him.

“Okay let’s stop arguing about this,” Will says, walking up to you all, “Let’s play Dungeons and Dragons!”

“I dunno if I have it in me to be the dungeon master, though,” you admit.

“That’s fine! Someone else can do it –“

“Has anyone else planned any campaigns, though?” Lucas asks with an eye roll.

“No,” Dustin mutters.

“It’s alright, I don’t know if I’m in the mood to play right now,” you mumble.

“What are you in the mood for?” Jane asks.

“Not sure,” you sigh.

“Do you want to talk?” Nancy asks, walking forward to you. She’d visited you as much as she could over the past month, but you knew that she was having a rough time of it too. She was going through the same things you were; she was just able to keep herself slightly more together.

“About what?” you ask quietly.

“Anything,” she says, “To anyone. We just wanted you to remember that we’re all here for you, and we love you, and we’re glad you’re back. If you’re overwhelmed, people can leave.”

You frown.

“I guess... I am a little overwhelmed. But I don’t... I don’t want anyone to leave, you know? I think I just... want everyone to act normally. And just... be here.”

“Okay,” Nancy smiles and hugs you, “We can do that.”

Dustin and Lucas go back to arguing about Star Wars while Max grabs Jane and leads her over to the kitchen table, the two of them immediately starting an arm wrestling match. Will and Jonathan are talking quietly in a corner and Steve is discussing work with Hopper.

You turn to your Mom, Zayde, and Bubbe.

“Um... can we all talk? Somewhere?” you ask them softly.

“Only if you’re up to it, sweetheart,” Mom says.

“I think I am. At the very least, I’d feel weird... not talking about it,” you say, “At least, going on like this without talking about it.”

“Alright,” Zayde nods, and you all go retreat into your room, sitting down together. Bubbe sits with you on your bed while Zayde and Mom sit on Nancy’s.

“Okay,” you whisper, “What do you know?”

“Everything,” Mom admits.

“At least, Chief Hopper says its everything,” Zayde grumbles.

“David...” Bubbe sighs.

“Sorry, Sisel, but he should have told us this all *last year*,” Zayde mutters.

“I know, but not in front of Mike.”

“No, in front of me,” you mutter.

“What –“

“I need... I don’t know. I can’t have any surprises, okay?” you mutter, “Not about important things.”

“Alright, Michael, if you’re sure,” Mom sighs.

“Fine. I understand that there was government intimidation involved in the whole affair, but honestly Hopper should have told your mother the truth last year,” Zayde says simply.

"Alright," you mutter.

"But that's not your fault," Mom says quietly.

"It's really not, zeisele," Bubbe reassures.

You nod and sit back, watching them all.

"That being said," Zayde pauses, "We're very proud of you."

"You're... what?"

"You've been having a tough time and dealing with things most grown ups couldn't handle," Mom says.

"A real nightmare scenario," Zayde agrees.

"But you've been very brave and worked hard to make things right. Not just for the town, not just for Will, not just for Jane, but for yourself. And how hard you've worked with Dr. Owens is proof of that," Bubbe murmurs.

"Thank you," you whisper, "I'm... sorry I hid everything from you."

"We forgive you Michael," Mom says, "Just... learn your lesson for next time, alright?"

"Yes," Zayde agrees, "If you find yourself slipping into that place again, please, *please* let one of us know."

"Your Zayde and I have had our share of bad times in the head. Something like the shoah... well. You know," Bubbe murmurs, "But we've gotten through the dark moments by talking to each other and being open about how we feel, and what we're going through."

"And that means everything we go through," Zayde says, "And the same should go for you."

"And not just Jane. She's a wonderful girl and we're happy you've found each other," Mom says, looking at you seriously, "But she has her own issues she has to work out. A long dark past and... the same years as you. You need to talk to an adult, at least... where you're

both at now.”

“Okay,” you agree softly, “Okay.”

“It’ll be hard, so you get a learning curve. We promise,” Mom reassures.

“Thanks,” you smile weakly.

Zayde pats you on the shoulder, “How are you feeling now?”

“Well, better than before,” you say, “But... overwhelmed, still. And tired. And wishing... things were different.”

“There’s no way to change the past,” Bubbe murmurs, shaking her head, “Only shaping the future.”

Your head hurts, but not because you’re confused or anything like that. It just... hurts.

“And you have to be in charge of your own future. I don’t mean that in a scary way, just a... you have control of it. And you need to remember that when everything seems out of your control,” Zayde continues.

“You need to try to talk to her, I don’t think we have any other choice,” Bubbe shouts.

“What – are you talking about, Bubbe?” you ask her in confusion. She tilts her head.

“I didn’t say anything, zeisele,” Bubbe murmurs.

“No, but you shouted –“

“Look, kid, we know you’re scared, but we have to try it,” Hopper roars, “Or else we could lose her forever –“

“Wait, Hopper?” you ask, whirling around.

“Hopper’s outside, Mike,” Mom says, reaching out for me, “What’s wrong.”

“I, um...”

It was like those flashbacks you had.

Except these weren't memories.

You'd never had this conversation before –

“Okay,” you feel yourself say, “I'll do it.”

“Do what, Mike?” Bubbe asks.

“Mike you're scaring us,” Zayde interjects.

“Thank you,” Joyce whispers, “We're going to be with you the whole way.”

“And everyone believes in you –“ Hopper continues.

“Mrs. Byers?” you shout.

“She's not here, Mike, Mike what's going on –“ Mom demands.

“His nose is bleeding, look –“

“He keeps spacing out –“

You shake your head madly and hold it in your hands. You breathe in deeply for a long time, and just focus on your feet.

“Mike?”

“I'm okay,” you whisper.

“What was all that?”

“I don't know.”

You look up to see them all looking at each other in worry. You wipe off your nose, which tickles from the blood.

“Um. I've been having flashbacks from like, all the bad stuff that's happened. It's that, I think.”

Zayde nods, and everyone around you breathes with relief.

"You know, I couldn't stop having flashbacks for years after the shoah," Zayde says, "And I still have them sometimes."

"Me too," Bubbe agrees, "It's... well, it's a trauma."

"The worst trauma."

"It's perfectly natural to have flashbacks," Mom reassures.

"Sorry, I don't know what was happening. And what the bloody nose is," you mumble.

"You used to get them as a kid," Mom says, "Remember? When the air was dry. I guess today is just a dry day."

"Yeah, I remember. Makes sense," you nod.

Your head is still spinning.

And you feel a little nauseous.

It's one thing to have a flashback

But you literally have never had that conversation in your life.

"I don't feel good," you whisper, "I need... to lie down."

"This is all very overwhelming," Bubbe murmurs, helping you to lie down on your bed as all three of them get up.

"Yes, the party wasn't a good idea," Mom sighs, "I knew I shouldn't have let them go ahead with it."

"Ah well. Do you want us to send them all home?" Zayde asks.

"Um... no. I'll just lie down for a bit," you reassure.

It doesn't help that you're back where it all happened.

"Can... Jane come here?" you ask.

Mom sighs.

“I don’t know, sweetheart...”

“They’re good *kids*,” Bubbe says, emphasizing the word, “Karen, it’s okay. And we’ll all be outside.”

“Yeah, alright. We’ll send her over,” Mom says. You nod and stare up at the ceiling, trying to not feel sick.

“Mike?”

You look up at Jane, smiling weakly at her as she walks over to the bed. She looks hesitantly around the room.

“What’s wrong?” you ask softly.

“Just... um... I don’t like being in here,” she whispers. She has tears in her eyes.

“Oh,” you realize, “Oh. Shit. You can go. I made a mistake.”

“No –“

“Jane, please,” you beg, sitting up, but immediately feeling woozy.

It doesn’t help that you can see badly faded bloodstains in the carpet.

“I... might vomit,” you whisper.

Jane runs to you and helps you up, leading you out of the room and through the hallway. You go to the bathroom together, without anyone paying much attention to you, as you slip inside and close the door.

You scramble to the toilet and lift up the seat, just staring into the bowl.

“Mike?” Jane asks softly.

“I don’t know,” you mumble, “I don’t know what’s wrong I just –“

You can’t stop it, so you lean over and vomit. Jane dives forward and

you can feel her hold your hair off the back of your neck.

“What – are you doing?” you gasp out.

“Seen it on TV.”

You laugh weakly.

“I’m not pregnant, Jane.”

“No,” she says, “But –“

“Thank you,” you murmur. You turn to look at her and she nods.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” she asks softly.

“I... um... how I was feeling overwhelmed and sick,” you mumble,
“And how I had a really weird flashback again.”

“And that’s why you feel sick?” Jane frowns at you.

You nod.

“What was it a flashback to?”

“That’s the thing I don’t – I don’t – I don’t remember,” you mutter, “I literally don’t remember having this conversation. And... Bubbe *and* Mrs. Byers *and* Hopper were there. And we were in my room. My room *here*.”

“That’s... weird,” Jane frowns. You nod, opening your eyes wide.

“When would *that* have ever happened?”

“I’m... not sure, Mike,” Jane murmurs. You nod, holding your head in your hands.

“My head hurts...”

“Should I tell everyone to go?”

“No,” you mutter, “Just... stay here with me.”

“Yes,” she whispers, sitting next to you on the bathroom floor. She pulls you into her arms and holds you loosely, and you rest your head on her shoulder until the pounding finally passes.

JANUARY 14 1986

“Well,” Nancy says, putting the papers down and beaming, “I got into Indiana Bloomington!”

“Oh sweetheart,” Karen says, smiling wide across her face, “I’m so proud.”

“Good for you, Nance,” you say, grinning at her.

“And with Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Purdue that’s the third acceptance. Just haven’t heard back from Ohio State or NYU yet,” Nancy says, “And I won’t till March.”

“Have you made any decisions yet?” Zayde asks, smiling at her and leaning against a wall.

“Not yet, I want to hear back from everywhere,” Nancy responds.

“Well, these are all lovely schools, zeisele,” Bubbe laughs, “You’d be lucky to go to any of these places.”

“I know. I just... don’t know what we can afford,” Nancy frowns.

Mom sighs, “I’m worried about it, too. But we can definitely do Indiana Bloomington.”

“And that’s not a bad school,” Zayde reassures.

“No,” Nancy agrees, “I think I’d like it there. And it’s not that far away... I mean, it’s in the southern part of the state so we’d have to drive a bit to get there, but at least I could come back quickly if something awful was happening.”

Mom sighs again, “Well, you still might be able to go somewhere else. I have to see about that job at the newspaper.”

“We can always pitch in –“

"Dad, you're doing enough by letting us stay here with you. Please, don't," Mom mutters.

Zayde doesn't say anything more, just shrugs and looks away.

"Have you thought about your major at all?" Bubbe asks, changing the subject and sitting down at the table.

"I'm not sure. Maybe biology?" Nancy pauses, "Maybe Literature?"

"Those are two ends of a scale," you say, smiling a little.

"Ha ha," Nancy says, sticking out her tongue at you.

"Well I think either is a lovely idea," Mom rolls her eyes at you, "You'd succeed at either."

"And you have time to decide, you're usually given freshman year and even most of sophomore to decide on your major," Zayde agrees.

"Yeah, right now I'm just focusing on getting through my last year," Nancy says.

"Well let's have a celebratory dinner!" Bubbe shouts, "Nancy, I can make the matzo ball soup you like so much –"

"Oh, yes please," Nancy beams.

"Alright, come help me start it up in the kitchen, David –"

"Yes, let me just get my apron!"

"Must you wear that every time we cook together –"

"I'd wear it constantly if you'd let me."

"Oy vey –"

You laugh a little, which makes your Mom smile at you. Nancy beams at you too.

"Mommy! I need help with homework!" Holly shouts from her and Mom's room.

"Coming," Mom sighs, getting up and walking over. You look at Nancy and smile weakly.

"Do you want me to be honest?"

"Of course, Mike," Nancy says, frowning.

"I hope you go to Bloomington, or Purdue. So you're still close," you mumble.

"Don't worry, Mike. I am seriously considering it," Nancy says.

"But – Jonathan – NYU –"

"If we don't go to school in the same place, that's okay, Mike," Nancy pauses, "I have lots of reasons for wanting to be close, not just you. And in the end, you're not allowed to blame yourself, okay?"

"Okay," you murmur.

You don't want to be the reason she and Jonathan break up, or... anything else.

You don't want to be the reason she doesn't follow her dreams at a different school somewhere else that was too far away for you to be happy with.

But they all told you to be honest.

They all told you to be open with how you feel.

So this is you.

Being open.

"I'm serious, Mike."

"Okay," you nod, smiling weakly. Nancy gives you a hug from the side, and you both get up to help Zayde and Bubbe in the kitchen.

JANUARY 26 1986

"Come on, let's go!"

Dustin starts peddling down the street as fast as he can. Lucas shouts and takes off after him, also peddling quickly.

“This is ridiculous,” Max snorts, skating on her skateboard.

Will finally had a new bike as a Chanukah present, and he takes off after the rest of them.

You turn to Jane and grin at her, “Ready?”

She beams, “Ready.”

She hops behind you on the bike – though the two of you are much bigger than the last time you did this – and you start peddling as quickly as you can.

“Are *you* ready?” Jane murmurs.

“I’m ready,” you reassure.

“Alright,” Jane says, and you stop peddling as she spins the chain super fast, making the peddles and the wheels zoom as you hold out your legs to the side.

The bike rushes forward, and you both whoop together as you race down the street.

“Oh *come on*,” Lucas shouts as you approach the rest of them.

“Dude, this is *so cheating!*” Max agrees.

“I have to carry extra weight!” you respond, and Jane keeps everything moving forward quickly, and you both laugh together as you reach Dustin and Will up in the front.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Dustin shouts.

“No –“ Will calls, but Jane pushes you forward even more, and you keep zooming straight through until you reach the end of the street.

Jane and you cheer together as you get off the bike, Jane still holding onto your waist and making your heart pound a little bit.

“Okay, you two *one hundred percent* cheated,” Dustin shouts, wheeling up to you both and dropping his bike on the curb.

“Yeah,” Will agrees, “You can’t use psychic powers to win.”

“Yeah, but we had a late start, *and* I had more weight to carry,” you laugh.

“Jane weighs like five pounds, she doesn’t count,” Dustin snorts.

“I do not,” Jane shakes her head.

“Yeah, she has plenty of weight,” you agree.

“Okay, if she has plenty of weight, then I bet you can’t pick her up,” Dustin challenges.

“Can too!”

“Can not!”

“Can too!”

“Can *not*!”

“Can *too*!”

“How old are you two? Seven?” Max demands, rolling her eyes.

“There’s an obvious solution to this,” Lucas points out, “Mike’s just gotta pick Jane up.”

Jane looks at you with wide eyes.

You roll yours, “Is that okay? It *really* doesn’t have to be.”

Jane frowns, “I dunno.”

“Then I won’t do it,” you nod.

“And we will never know,” Dustin grins.

“You’ll just have to take me at my word,” you snort.

“Oh bullshit,” Dustin rolls his eyes, “You can’t do it.”

“Can too!”

“Can not!”

“Can too!”

“Can *not!*”

“Oh my *God*,” Max groans.

“Alright, I’m going to just, you know, go to the arcade like a normal person,” Lucas snorts.

“Yeah I’m coming with you,” Max agrees. The two of them start going down the next street. Dustin goes after them, and Will follows soon too.

You turn to Jane, “Ready to go?”

She frowns, looking after the rest of them until they disappear out of sight. She then looks at you.

“You can try, if you want.”

“Wha –“

“To pick me up.”

“Oh – um – okay.”

You reach, awkwardly, your heart pounding in your throat, and you grab Jane from underneath her knees.

At least she’s wearing jeans so you feel less... awkward.

You hold her with your other arm around her back and then lift up, grunting.

She isn’t very light, but she’s not very heavy either. You lift her up and grunt in some pain, but she wraps her arms around your neck.

Your faces are very close together.

“I... uh... um...” you stammer.

She smiles weakly at you, “Can too.”

You laugh a little, planting a small kiss on her nose, before letting her back down.

“Shall we catch up with them?”

“Yeah, but we can go slower,” Jane pauses, “I just want to ride with you.”

“Me too,” you agree, and you peddle through the town together, her resting her head on your back.

“Mike?” she murmurs quietly.

“Yeah, Jane?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

You keep riding together.

“Remember when we met,” she whispers, “And we rode around like this everywhere?”

“Yeah,” you laugh, remembering and feeling your heart grow warmer.

“I was a lot quieter then,” she says.

“You’re still quiet,” you respond.

“Yeah, but not as much. I... I dunno. I have trouble talking, I guess,” Jane murmurs.

“Well, talking can be hard,” you agree.

You keep peddling, the two of you riding through the town.

“You didn’t sit as close to me back then,” you comment after a while.

“I wasn’t as used to touching people back then,” she mumbles.

Her voice sounds shaky.

“Jane? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she whispers.

You stop peddling, pulling over on the side of the road.

“Jane?”

“Nothing’s wrong, okay?” Jane mutters, “Please.”

“Jane, friends don’t lie. Especially girlfriends,” you whisper.

Jane looks at you for a long time, and you just look at each other on the side of the road.

“I... I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it,” Jane murmurs, “I don’t... I don’t really know what I’m feeling... right now.”

“Okay,” you whisper.

“My mind’s been... all over the place? Since... everything happened,” Jane continues, “And I don’t... I don’t know what I’m feeling. Most of the time.”

“Okay,” you say again, “But... you shouldn’t keep it bottled up forever. I did that, and it was a mistake.”

“I know,” Jane agrees, “And I promise... I won’t.”

“Okay,” you repeat a third time, “You say you weren’t used to touching people.”

She nods.

“Can I... ask you something?” you say, before you can stop yourself.

Be open.

Be open.

Be open.

Be open.

Be open.

Be open.

Be...

Open.

"Yes," she says.

"Was it... okay... when I kissed you the first time?" you ask seriously,
"I... I should have asked for permission. I think."

She smiles, "Yeah, it was okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay..."

"Mike, I liked you too, even back then. And you made me happy. And it was a small kiss. A baby kiss."

You laugh a little, "Yeah, I guess it was."

"And if I didn't want you to kiss me you would have known *then*."

"Fair point."

You both laugh together for a little while.

It's nice to laugh with her.

It always is.

"Mike?"

“Yeah, Jane?”

“I’m so glad you’re back.”

You lean in and hug her, tightly and she hugs you back just as tightly.

“I’m glad I’m back, too.”

“Are you talking to people?”

“Yeah, you’re one of them,” you laugh in her ear.

She pulls back from you.

“Not just me. Our friends, and your Mom, and your grandparents, and Nancy, and –“

“Yes, Jane. I promise. I’m talking to everyone. As much as I can,” you pause, “I can’t... say I don’t... still have bad feelings.”

She nods.

You swallow.

“But I’m fighting them better. I am. I promise.”

She leans up and kisses you softly, and you feel so nice and warm at that as it spreads from your lips to your toes and fingers. You pull her closer to you and she wraps her arms around you, the two of you holding on to each other tightly. You kiss her a little harder and she makes a soft sound, causing your heart to flip.

You pull back from her and rest your forehead on hers, the two of you staring at each other lovingly.

“We should head off,” Jane murmurs.

“Agreed,” you say, and you both get back on the bike and continue peddling away.

FEBRUARY 14 1986

“Alright, so, what are you doing today with her?” Lucas asks.

He came over right away in the morning, pacing worriedly through your room as you frown at him.

“Lucas, you’re being –“

“Don’t say I’m being ridiculous. I am *not* being ridiculous right now.”

“Fine, stupid then.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake.”

“Don’t know ‘im.”

“I will punch you.”

“What is freaking you out so much?” you say, frowning.

“Last year Max and I weren’t ‘official’ or whatever you want to call it on Valentine’s Day, so we didn’t do anything for it because she didn’t want to – I dunno I guess she just doesn’t like the idea very much in general – and so this year we *are* official and I want to do something nice and fun with her but not too much pressure because she’s not a girly girl and she doesn’t want to do anything like normal girls do, and I figured, well, Jane is whatever the *opposite* of normal is, so maybe last year you guys did something and I could copy that –“

“Lucas, you are even stupider than I thought.”

“Shut up, man.”

“No, I’m serious.”

Lucas glares at you.

“I’m just asking what you did with Jane –“

“Right. So what do you and Max do on dates usually?”

“I dunno – we go play games at the arcade and then get a pizza! Or we go to a movie and split the popcorn –“

“Okay, so do that.”

“*What?*”

“If you want to make it special, maybe offer to pay for it all if you don’t already, or take her out for ice cream, or something else she’d like. But you don’t need to be... over the top about it, you know? Like going to a fancy restaurant, or buying her nice things, like that’s all great for other people, but I think Max would just like you both to have a nice night together.”

“Is that... what you did?”

“Well, Jane was still in hiding back then,” you smile a little.

It’s nice to remember.

Sometimes.

“So all we did was hang out at the cabin, and we watched TV together, and I had learned how to cook my mom’s spaghetti recipe, so I made that and she loved it, and we just spent time together. It was nice,” you explain.

“So... are you doing that again this year?” Lucas asks, frowning.

“No, this year she’s going to surprise me with something and I have no idea what,” you shake your head, “Which is important – *she’s* not planning on doing anything, is she?”

“I... don’t think so?” Lucas grimaces.

“Did you guys not even plan this beforehand?”

“Not really,” Lucas admits.

You snort, “Idiot.”

“Oh leave me alone.”

“Not for this!”

“Let’s go to school and you can *ask her there*,” you snort, “Nancy!”

“Yes!”

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah –“

All three of you pile into the car together and get to school, picking up Jane on the way.

“So, Max,” Lucas says as you all walk through the halls together, Jane holding onto your hand and just smiling.

“Yeah, stalker?” Max asks, looking amused.

“Um... what did you want to do today? You know, after school?”

“Probably go watch TV,” Max rolls her eyes, slamming her locker shut.

“Uh... I meant more like... for Valentine’s... Day?” Lucas grimaces.

You are trying *really* hard to not laugh.

“You... hadn’t mentioned anything,” Max raises an eyebrow.

“Right, well, um, I wanted to surprise you, which feels really stupid now –“

“Just a little bit.”

“Are you okay with... not... watching TV?”

“Sure,” Max snorts, “What do you want to do?”

“Um... well I was trying to figure something out but... well... what do you want to do?”

“Do you want to go and heckle one of the awful movies that came out today?” Max offers, “WE can make fun of it in the back.”

“Sounds good,” Lucas grins.

“I’m so proud of them,” you whisper to Jane. Jane snickers softly.

“Do you want a rematch on the arm wrestling without psychic powers?” Max challenges.

Jane walks up to her and grins, “Any day, I can beat you.”

“Oh, I’d like to see that,” Max laughs.

The two of them shove each other lightly, before you all split up, laughing, to go to class.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for baring with me through the last two chapters!

I realized (thanks to a commenter) that the ending of the last chapter was kind of like a season finale, and so I decided to divide the story into four parts (you can call them seasons, though part one has both seasons one and two of the actual show). So Part One is Chapters 1 - 9; Part Two Chapters 10 - 20; Part Three Chapters 21 - 31; Part Four Chapters 32 - 44; and then the Epilogue. So there's that

Lighter chapter, but we all need that, and I set up a few things so there's that at least

(Yes the chapter title is a reference to a musical. I actually don't like many musicals and that one was tough for me to watch but it fits so here we are)

I updated the side-drabble fic (so the one that has scenes from other character's POVs) with the scene where Hopper & co tell Karen, Zayde and Bubbe about what's been happening to Mike, so be sure to check that out (number two in the YFIT "series")!

Also because life is a strange, weird place, there's now a discord server where people talk about this story. I don't know how we got here, frankly, but it's fun so far. So come join us! (It's basically a chatting server) <https://discord.gg/gSGvPrR>

Please leave a comment! Thank you :)

22. Walking Time Bomb

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for allusions to childhood abuse and... the slowly growing sexuality of teenagers? Puberty? Et cetera.

F E B R U A R Y 1 8 1 9 8 6

J A N E H O P P E R

“Happy Birthday tooooooo yooooou!”

Everyone finishes singing as Mike blows out a bunch of candles on top of a cake.

You still find this weird, but honestly at this point the weirdness of everything around you is normal, and things you find normal are... weird, instead.

“Happy Birthday sweetheart,” his mom says, hugging Mike tightly.

“Thanks Mom,” Mike says awkwardly, grinning a little bit.

“For your birthday, you get... a new last name!” Dustin cheers.

Mike glares at him and sticks out his tongue.

“It is nice, though. New start, right?”

“Right,” his mom responds.

“Alright, it’s time for presents!” Nancy shouts, pulling out boxes of them. Mike opens them eagerly, revealing books and new sweaters because he’s growing very, very, very tall.

Much taller than you.

It’s... annoying.

“Okay, would you like your special present first, or some of the

others?” his mom asks.

“Hmmm... other ones first,” Mike responds.

“Here you go buddy!” Dustin says excitedly, handing Mike a poorly-wrapped rectangle. Mike looks at him in amusement, before opening it, and grinning.

“Sweet, Return of the Jedi! Finally we can watch the whole trilogy,” Mike gasps.

“Yeah! We all pitched in to get it for you,” Dustin nods, pointing to the rest of the party, “Well, except Jane.”

He glares at you and you glare back.

“I have my *own* gift!”

“Here,” Nancy rolls her eyes, “It’s from me and Jonathan.”

Mike eagerly opens it to find a manual for the Ghostbusters roleplaying game.

“Oh man!” Mike gasps, flipping through the pages, “Oh *man*.”

“Dude,” Dusting asps.

“This is going to be freaking amazing,” Lucas agrees.

Max gives you a look and you laugh.

“Okay, I think the next gift has to be the big one.” Hopper says, “Before we give our present.”

“Alright,” Mike’s mom agrees, and she pulls out a large package, which Mike looks at with wide eyes and parted lips.

“No –“

“Just open it!”

Mike rips off all the paper very fast, revealing a large box saying “Nintendo ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM” on it.

“Mom! Oh my God! Mom!” Mike shouts, looking at it happily, “Oh my god!”

“It’s from me and your grandparents, and it comes bundled with Super Mario Bros,” his mom says, beaming at him.

“And your no-good father is gone, so it won’t be taken away from you for no reason,” Zayde mutters.

“David,” Bubbe hisses.

“Just telling it like it is.”

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you –“

“Michael, calm down!” his mom laughs, but the three adults all hug him together as he jumps up in excitement.

“Alright kid, here are some presents from me and Joyce and... Steve, apparently,” Hopper looks over at Steve, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Look, they were all expensive, and I’m a junior cop, *you don’t pay me enough*,” Steve responds, glaring.

“Kid, this isn’t a work environment –“

“I am nineteen years old –“

“That doesn’t make you not a kid –“

Jonathan and Nancy are laughing quietly together in a corner, as Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Max all groan. You just look at Mike, smirking, as he smirks back at you.

“Please stop,” Joyce groans, handing over the two wrapped packages to Mike. He opens them happily to reveal two other games – Ice Climber and Excitebike.

“Oh wow!” Mike gasps, “Thanks, you guys!”

“Of course kiddo,” Hopper nods.

“Oh man we’re going to play that all day come on let’s set it up –“ Dustin says quickly, and the other boys grab the box and run over to the TV.

Mike grins and hugs his parents again while you stand awkwardly next to them all.

“Jane, I know you have a gift –“ his mom says.

“I’d like to have him open it alone with me, if that’s okay,” you murmur. His mom nods and people start milling about and talking while the other kids set up the game system. You sit down next to Mike and hand him the wrapped present, biting your lip nervously.

“You didn’t have to get me anything, Jane, I know you don’t have an allowance,” Mike murmurs, taking your hands in his.

“I made something,” you say, smiling at him. He grins back and unwraps it, pulling it out and looking at you.

“It’s... a book?”

“Yeah,” you respond, “I bought a notebook at the store. Just open it.”

He opens up the leather-bound book and starts reading from a page.

“I remember when I first saw you in the woods. I was cold and scared and wet, and you found me there. You didn’t even question it, you just brought me home –“

Mike looks up at you with tears in his eyes, “What... is it?”

“I just wrote down... everything I feel about you. It was hard, but Doctor Owens said it would be a good way to practice my writing,” you take in a deep breath, “And... when everything happened... I needed a way to deal with it.”

He swallows, “Um... does it talk about...”

“It does.”

“Oh.”

"But it talks about the good things, too. Mostly the good things."

He smiles weakly at you, "Thank you, Jane."

You lean in and kiss him, and he holds you back tightly for a long time, ignoring Dustin shouting "MIKE, JANE, GET *IN HERE!*"

"I love you," you murmur, "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," he grins, "I love you."

"MIKE!"

"COMING!" Mike screams back, looking annoyed. You giggle and pull on one of his curls, making it go *boing!*

"Please don't do that in front of them all or else they think it'll be okay for *them* to do it," Mike groans.

"No promises," you giggle.

"Must you hurt me in this way?"

"Yes," you laugh more, and you both walk over to the living room to take turns playing video games. The cake could, apparently, wait till later.

F E B R U A R Y 2 2 1 9 8 6

"Dustin, are you *sure* you don't need anything?" you ask.

You were supposed to go and pick him up (and by 'pick up' you mean 'ride on the back of his bike to Mike's house') for the usual Saturday hang out and minor study session.

But Dustin was lying in bed, refusing to move.

"I feel awful. Just leave me here to die."

"*Dustin.*"

"Take care of Yertle for me."

“Dustin!”

“I am fated to die, Jane. Fated to die alone and unwanted, forever –“

Dustin lets out a long, painful cough.

“So Nadine didn’t say yes when you asked her out,” you say calmly, “*Big deal.*”

“I am in LOVE,” Dustin shouts, “I am in LOVE and I have been SCORNED –“

“Dustin, you are not *in love.*”

“Yes I am! You and Mike do not have the monopoly on *love* –“

“Dustin, you barely know Nadine.”

“So?”

“So, that means you aren’t in love with her. You like her a lot, and you probably want to kiss her, but that’s not the same thing as *love.*”

“Alright then, miss smarty pants,” Dustin sits up and glares at you, “What *is* love then?”

“Um,” you sit down at the foot of his bed and frowns, “Uh...”

“Come on, oh grand expert.”

“Well... you know how when you’re friends with someone... you’d do anything for them?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’d never lie or break a promise?”

“Yup.”

“Well okay. Start with that. Then... you know how when your friend is upset, you’re upset too?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Well... imagine that feeling but like, deeper. You feel... their pain... inside of you. Like it’s your own. And you would not just do anything for them. You’d do *everything* for them. And you want to spend forever with them. And they... they make you feel warm inside. All over. So happy and warm and good. And... you don’t even need to really be doing anything with them. You’re just happy to sit with them somewhere and read together. And you can’t imagine your life without them. And...” you’re rambling now, which you’ve picked up from Mike.

You’ve picked up a lot of things from Mike. And he from you, really.

“Okay okay okay. I guess I don’t love Nadine,” Dustin sighs, “But... then why do I want to kiss her and take her on dates?”

“I dunno. I guess you like her – like her?” you offer, “Which can *lead* to love, but it isn’t *love* love.”

“Fine,” Dustin groans, flopping back on the board, “No one will ever love me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” you say, “Your friends all love you in a not-kissing way.”

You understand that now.

You think.

“Consider: you know what I meant.”

“Okay, I know you’re going to find someone who will love you.”

“I swear, if you spout any of Will’s soulmate crap –“

“I don’t believe in soulmates.”

“You... *don’t*?”

“No. It’s ridiculous. Mike said once that it would mean there’s more order in the universe than their actually is.”

Dustin laughs, “Agreed. The universe tends towards disorder!”

You frown at him, “What?”

“It’s the second law of thermodynamics – you know what, never mind. Chemistry is next year.”

You shake your head and continue, “Anyway, soulmates don’t exist, but that doesn’t mean you’re *doomed* to never be in love with someone.”

“No one’s weird enough to get me. All the girls who *do* get me are already with people.”

“I think you never know what will happen or who you’ll meet in the future.”

“But all normal people just... I dunno. Like, they have their lives and they’re happy and they *didn’t* have to fight monsters and see people die and watch their friends deteriorate into ghosts of themselves and... and... I just can’t relate to anyone. And when I do they find me weird because, well, it’s not like they know about everything, and also I’m just weird to begin with, but not even nerdy girls like me because *I am an extra freak* –“

“Other societal outcasts exist,” you murmur softly, “It’s not just us.”

“We’re an entire other *breed* of societal outcasts.”

“Right, and there are people of equally ridiculous weirdness.”

“Like *who*.”

“Well, my sister and her friends,” you murmur.

Your heart pains for a minute.

“The *murder family*?”

“Well, yes...”

“Great. That’s comforting.”

“All I’m saying is that eventually you’ll find someone who can handle

you, and who you can handle, that's all."

"Such as a murder family."

"No! Not them! I just mean we're not alone, that if we exist and the Murder Family exists then there must be other groups of people out there just as fucked up as us who aren't us or a murder family. The murder family are all adults anyway," you shout, "Except my sister. She's only a little older. But she's a bag of crazy you don't want to touch."

"Great. My crazy friend is saying her crazy sister is too crazy for me."

"Yup."

Dustin glares at you before sighing, "Yeah fair enough."

"And I don't know where they are, anyway," you mutter quietly.

"Okay, moving on from this weird alternate universe we've entered where suddenly we are talking about your murder family as a serious prospect for my dating life," Dustin says, sitting up and looking at you, "If you want to find them... can't you? In your head?"

"I could," you admit softly.

"But?"

"I don't want to."

"Okay."

"DUSTIN! DUSTIN, DO YOU COPY?"

The buzzing of the walkie shocks both of you. Dustin reaches for it and shouts, "SHUT UP WE'RE HAVING A MOMENT HERE."

You laugh.

"Why... don't you want to?"

You swallow and shake your head, staring down pointedly at your knees.

“DUSTIN? DUSTIN, THERE IS A BIOLOGY TEST WE HAVE TO STUDY FOR –“

“OH MY GOD SHUT UP, OVER,” Dustin shouts, before bursting into a coughing fit and groaning.

You roll your eyes, “We should go.”

“No,” Dustin responds, turning off the walkie and looking at you, “Have you talked to Mike about this?”

You shake your head.

“Why not?”

“He’s... been...”

“You can’t bottle up your own feelings because he –“

“Sure I can,” you whisper, “I’m already doing it.”

“Jane, that’s not healthy and you know it.”

“What do you know about healthy?” you snap.

Dustin frowns at you.

“Sorry,” you mutter.

“I don’t know much,” Dustin says softly, “But I do know that you shouldn’t bottle it up, either.”

You let out a long sigh.

“Um... when I was there... I talked about this a little bit, back after I closed the gate.”

“Right, right.”

“I mentioned that she made me see... papa?” the word escapes your lips in a hoarse, pained whisper.

You don’t want to say it.

You don't want to think it.

You don't want to think about the lab.

Make the memories come flooding back.

Overtake your brain.

Overtake your thoughts.

Overwhelm you.

Fill you everywhere.

Everywhere.

Everywhere...

"Jane?"

"Sorry."

"Is that all?"

"I mean. She made papa talk to me," you mumble.

"Right... and what did he say?"

"Um... that... that I have a wound," you say, trying to not cry,
"And... that I need to heal it. Or it'll fester and kill me."

Dustin looks at you seriously, frowning.

"Jane?"

"Yeah?"

"Is that true?"

"Probably," you admit quietly.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't... think I can."

Dustin frowns at you worriedly, "Jane..."

"We should go," you whisper, standing up and smoothing out your black skirt, "Come on."

"Jane –"

"You heard Lucas, we have a test."

Dustin grumbles, but follows you out the door.

MARCH 6 1986

This is it.

The most awkward conversation of your life.

You'd been putting it off and putting it off and putting it off and putting it off as long as you could.

You managed to go yourself, in secret, multiple times, using money you'd saved up from random sources (you wish you could have an allowance, but Hopper couldn't really afford it, and he was saving up for you to go to college anyway, so you understood why in the end).

But you can't put it off anymore.

You can't try to gather funds yourself anymore.

You can't mooch off of anyone, or ask anyone to help.

You need to talk to Hop.

You are so uncomfortable.

All.

Of.

The.

“The dress didn’t fit quite right and Nancy helped me get my first one –“

“Jesus Christ –“

The birds were screaming because Hopper was talking loudly. It was all very, very, very loud and you were having trouble continuing to talk.

“I’ve been washing them myself with my other clothes...”

“And you haven’t needed new ones since then? I’ve been... wondering if you were going to... ask... to get your *first* ones.”

Hopper looks about as uncomfortable as you yourself feel.

“I... um... save up bits of money... to buy them when I need them,” you mutter, “But...”

“But?”

“I... uh... don’t have enough right now. And I really, really, *really* need new ones.”

Hopper grimaces, “Alright.”

“Can you take me?”

“Yup.”

“Thank you –“

“It’s fine, kid. That’s part of the job. Um... How many do you need?”

“I need to replace all of them.”

“*All* of them?”

You groan quietly, “All of them.”

“Wh... why?”

“They’re all pinchy and tight and too small and you can see through

my shirts now that they're too small and other girls make fun of me and –“

“Okay okay okay, slow down,” Hopper says calmly, “I... don't get it but I get it in the sense that yeah, you're right. Let's go to the store. Don't go overboard, and get *practical* ones, please.”

“Why wouldn't I get practical ones?” you ask, frowning.

Hopper looks at you for a long time.

“You're right, I don't know why I said that.”

“Why *don't* people get practical ones?”

“I don't really know, myself, honestly.”

“People are weird?”

“People are weird.”

People did lots of weird things.

Wore weirdly uncomfortable looking bras – and underwear – and other clothes.

And looked at each other naked.

And made fun of you for not understanding things about this.

And you didn't want to think about it at all.

You just buy the most comfortable bras you can find before leaving the store as quickly as possible, and Hopper looks just as relieved as you are.

M A R C H 1 8 1 9 8 6

“Friends! Romans! Countrymen!”

“Dork!”

Max bursts out laughing at lunch as Dustin glares at Lucas, who grins

back at him.

“Anyways – right – Lend me your ears!”

“I can’t, they’re attached to my head,” you say in confusion.

Max laughs even more.

“Oh my *God* –“

“Just come out with it, Dustin,” Mike says, rolling his eyes. You rest your head against his arm and close your eyes happily.

“I am embarking on a new journey of adventure! Romance! Intrigue!”

“Being even weirder than usual,” Lucas snorts.

“You – shut your mouth –“

“Dustin get *on with it*,” Mike begs.

Will looks at you from across the table and you both grin at each other.

“I have my new typewriter and I am going to be beginning the greatest undertaking known to mankind...”

You all look at him in amusement, along with everyone else, leaning closer towards him to catch what he is going to say –

Dustin just grins at you all.

“*Get on with it!*” you all shout.

You may or may not have rented Monty Python and the Holy Grail that past weekend to watch.

“I’m going to write a story about what *I* think the Star Wars prequels should be!”

“For *fuck’s* sake –“

“Dustin, *seriously?*”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“I was expecting this to be something important.”

“Dustin,” you groan.

“Oh you are?” Will gasps, the only positive one in the group.

“This is important!” Dustin protests, “I’m going to be writing an *epic, gripping* tale – the kind of tale we all wish we had from George Lucas himself –“

“You are so full of it right now!” Mike snorts.

“Plenty of people write Star Wars books! And now I will be the next –“

“Dustin, the prequels aren’t open for public creation!”

“So? I’m not going to *publish* it. I’m going to write it for you all to read!”

“This should be good,” Max snorts.

“I will write a chapter every day –“

“Every *day*?”

“And you will all read it and tell me what you think –“

“We cannot read a chapter of your story *every day* –“

“No protests! If I am to tell the entire *epic* tale of Anakin Skywalker, his wife Emine Organa –“

“You did *not* make that up –“

“Oh my *God* –“

“And their epic battles as jedi, side-by-side, during the horrible Clone Wars –“

“Dustin, please stop torturing me...”

“That spanned the entire Galaxy –“

“*You* span the entire Galaxy.”

“Oh come on, guys,” Dustin grumbles, slumping, “I’m really excited about this! I have a great idea and I want you all to read it!”

“I’ll read it,” you offer, smiling.

“Me too,” Will agrees.

Mike rolls his eyes, “Fine, I’ll read too.”

All of you look expectantly at Max and Lucas.

“*Fine*, if you’re all going to be talking about it all the time, I guess I’ll read. If only to make fun of you,” Max laughs.

You all turn to Lucas.

“No! No!” Lucas protests, “I do not have to participate in this!”

“Everyone else is,” you point out.

“Come on, make fun of Dustin’s terrible story with me,” Max says.

“I do not want my opinion of Star Wars to be ruined by Dustin’s crazed –“

“Maybe it’ll be good! You don’t know!” Dustin protests.

“Oh I do very well know, because you and I have *very different ideas* of what a prequel of Star Wars should be!”

“Just give me a chance. I promise there will be something in it for everyone.”

“*Fine*, but I will *not hold back*.”

“Bring it!”

“We’re going to witness a murder, aren’t we?” Will groans.

“The question is, who will murder who,” you agree.

“Dustin could very well murder Lucas for being too critical of his story,” Mike continues, frowning.

“But,” Will points out, “Lucas could murder Dustin for doing something in the story that he disagrees with on a fundamental level.”

“So basically, it’s a walking time bomb,” Mike agrees.

“Time... bomb?” you ask quietly, “I know what a bomb is but –“

“It’s a bomb that’s on a timer. So like, you can time it for a day or something, and it’ll go off in a day, rather than right then.”

“Oh,” you murmur.

You feel like you’re one of those, sometimes.

M A R C H 2 5 1 9 8 6

“Are you ready to go?”

Mike looks very, very, *very* excited, and it makes you very, very, *very* happy to see.

“Yup,” you twirl a little bit, “Do I look normal enough for your synagogue?”

His mouth is partially open and his eyes are wide as you twirl and your skirt goes up in a spinning motion. You stop spinning and the skirt settles back down around your legs, but he’s still looking like that.

Just... weird.

“What?” you ask.

He startles and shakes his head rapidly, closing his mouth.

“Uh... you look really beautiful.”

“Thanks,” you mumble, blushing.

You wish he had just *said* that rather than act weird, though.

“Like... *really* beautiful.”

“Thanks,” you say again, walking up to him and kissing him on the cheek, “Ready to go?”

“Yup. My mom’s in the car,” he looks nervous, suddenly, “I’m supposed to be practicing driving.”

“You got the Learner’s Permit?”

“Yup, and I’m terrified, but I drove over here and I’m alive, so...”

“This should be interesting,” you giggle.

“I am especially terrified because I have *you* in the car and I don’t want to hurt you,” Mike admits.

You kiss him on the cheek again, “You’ll be fine.”

He shakes his head in disbelief and you both run together to the car, where his mom is waiting in the front seat.

“Ready to go?” she asks as Mike sits in the front. Holly is next to you, dressed in a costume (a fairy) and looking excited.

“Yeah, mom,” Mike says, putting the car in motion and driving extremely slowly and carefully through the town. He drives more cautiously than anyone you’ve driven with before, but you eventually reach the synagogue.

You all head out together into the building, where there are a lot of carnival games and booth set up, and plenty of food. Holly runs off with Mike’s mom, with a bunch of other small kids who are dressed in costumes, playing games and things around the synagogue’s hall.

“What do you want to do first?” Mike asks.

“Let’s play some games,” you say, beaming at him, and he takes your

hand and you go around the room together. You throw rings onto pegs and try to get prizes together, and Mike manages to keep you from cheating *too* much.

“Come on, Jane,” he groans as you get that look in your eye –

You keep *losing* and it is *very annoying* –

“This is a synagogue, not a sleazy real carnival where people trick you out of money. Don’t take money from a religious building,” Mike hisses.

“Fine,” you grumble in annoyance, just throwing the rings normally.

You don’t win anything, but it’s nice to have Mike and you hang out together, going around the room and throwing things.

All the little kids are dressed up in silly costumes, and you like to watch them run around and play games themselves.

Mike and you go up to one of the booths and you try to dunk the Rabbi into the dunk tank, the Rabbi laughing as lots of little kids fail to successfully complete the task.

You grab the ball and throw it, Mike watching you and smiling as you keep throwing the ball awkwardly and failing to have the Rabbi fall into the tank. Finally, you focus *just* a little bit, throw it, and he falls – splash! – to the joy and cheers of all the kids.

“You didn’t,” Mike laughs, glaring at you a little bit.

“I did,” you say proudly as you’re given a large teddy bear. You take the bear and hand it off to a kid next to you, who squeals in pure delight and runs away.

“Happy?” you ask, sticking your tongue out at him.

Mike grins at you a little bit, blushing as well.

“What?”

He still doesn’t say anything, just continues to smile at you.

“*What?*” you demand irritably.

“Oh,” he says, shrugging, “You just amaze me, that’s all.”

You roll your eyes at him and take his hand, walking through the carnival together and playing more of the games. Neither of you manages to win anything more, but you have fun, laughing and walking and talking together.

“Everyone! Everyone! Please take a seat!” the now very wet Rabbi calls from the front of the room, “It’s time for the Purim play!”

Mike grins eagerly at you and pulls you to go and sit together, him wrapping his arm around your shoulder as you look in confusion up at the stage.

“Chag sameach!” a woman greets, walking up to the front and waving.

“Chag sameach!” everyone greets back, and you do too, even though you are quite confused.

“Today we will be putting on the story of Esther and the evil Haman –“

“BOOOO!” everyone shouts, including Mike, so you boo too, grinning as everyone gets rowdy and loud together.

“In the same style as Star Wars! We hope you enjoy!” the woman yells, and Mike cheers very loudly, and seeing him this happy and carefree makes you feel the most hopeful you’ve felt in *ages*.

You wish you still had the notebook so you could write about today in it.

Perhaps you’ll get another one for some other time to give to him.

“Long ago in the days of the Persian Empire –“

You sit back and watch the play, and laugh as the character act silly and ridiculous, and boo along with everyone else every time the name Haman is said. Mike is laughing especially hard, and looks so

happy, so very very happy, that you wish you could live in this moment forever.

The play ends and you and Mike get up together, wandering through the carnival. He takes you over to a place with some triangle-shaped pastries, the two of you eating them and the jelly in the middle getting all over your lips.

“Oh no,” Mike says, looking at you in worry, “Here –“

He pulls out a napkin and dabs your lips with it, looking even more flustered than before.

“What?” you ask, but your heart is pounding too as he looks at you.

Pounding much, much, much too fast.

“Um... sorry! Nothing!” Mike squeaks, throwing away the napkin and taking your hand.

You both play some more bad carnival games, and eat more of the fun pastries and other foods spread out all over the table, as some adults clear away all the chairs that were out for the play.

“We’ll now be having a dance! Come out and celebrate the fact that we are alive!”

A bunch of laughter goes up at that, and you find yourself agreeing with the thought. Mike grabs your hand and pulls you out onto the dance floor, spinning you around under his arm.

“Woah!” you shout, gasping but giggling and looking up at Mike in amusement.

“Sorry, gotta use my height to my advantage *sometimes*,” Mike says, beaming down at you. You stick your tongue out up at him.

“You are far too tall –“ you grumble, but he leans down and kisses you before you can finish.

You squeak in response and pull away, glaring and shouting, “Mike!”

“Oops, please finish,” he says, blushing.

“You are far too tall and skinny,” you finish, glaring more, “How?”

“Genetics,” he answers seriously, making you giggle more. He twirls you again, and you shout happily, and then he pulls you back to rest on his chest.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

“I love you,” you whisper back.

The music changes to something more upbeat – something about S’s and A’s and F’s and E’s and T’s and Y’s and why was there a song spelling out SAFETY – but Mike keeps dancing slowly.

“Mike?” you ask quietly.

He seems to be spacing out, his eyes going in and out of focus.

Like those other times.

“Mike!” you shout, shaking him a little bit. He blinks rapidly, shaking his head and groaning.

“Um –“

You drag him away, pulling him to a corner and sitting with him on the floor. He holds his head in his hands and then looks up again, blood on his palm.

“Mike?” you whisper softly.

You don’t want to see his blood.

Ever, really.

“Um... I think it’s from,” he touches his nostril with his finger, “Yeah, I have a nosebleed.”

Your eyes widen.

“What?”

“People get them for reasons other than psychic powers, Jane,” Mike says softly.

“Oh.”

“I used to get them a lot when I was a kid –“

“What happened?” you demand, cutting him off.

He frowns, “Um... I dunno. I was remembering the Snow Ball for some reason.”

“Remembering?”

“Flashback, I guess.”

“Mike,” you say firmly, “I talked to Hop about this.”

“Oh?”

“Flashbacks are usually to things that were traumatic.”

“... Oh.”

“Yours aren’t always to things that were traumatic.”

“They also can be to things that never happened,” Mike jokes. You glare at him.

“Mike.”

“S – I mean. Um. Not the s-word. Something else. That means the same thing as the s-word.”

You shake your head and sigh, “Maybe it’s something else?”

“What else could it be?”

And you both stare out ahead together, wondering, as the carnival continues to happen around you.

Notes for the Chapter:

Look the Ghostbusters Role Playing Game just has a release date of "1986" so even if it didn't come out by Feb 18 1986 we're all just going to PRETEND THAT IT DID thank you and goodnight

Also did you know that VHS tapes cost a _lot_ in the 80s so that's why all the kids basically had to pitch in for Return of the Jedi

And here in this chapter you can see the author making fun of herself in REAL TIME!

finger guns at you all and cha cha real smooths out of the author's notes

DON'T FORGET TO JOIN US ON THE DISCORD!
<https://discord.gg/gSGvPrR>

PLEASE comment!!! I really want to hear what you all think and I didn't get as many for the last chapter :.) thanks <3 <3 <3

23. Secrets and Tubs

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for allusions to underage sexuality I suppose

A P R I L 9 1 9 8 6

M I K E L E V I N S O N

“So, how has everything else been, in general? Besides worrying about Jane.”

You look at Doctor Owens and frown, thinking.

You’ve spent most of the session today talking about Jane.

You can’t stop worrying about Jane.

“Okay, mostly.”

“Let’s talk about that ‘mostly.’”

“Um... well, I’m doing better in school.”

“Good!”

“And I don’t self harm anymore. I do feel like I want to, though.”

“But it’s good you’re controlling those urges.”

“Yeah...”

“What else?”

“I... I still get bullied but, I dunno...”

“It’s alright Michael. You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to.”

You sigh and run a hand through your hair, “It’s not even that I don’t

want to. It's that it's hard for me to put my feelings into words."

"Oh I understand completely."

"Like, words are hard."

"Very hard."

Doctor Owens smiles at you, and you find yourself smiling back, which is strange when you don't *entirely* trust him yet.

"I guess... even though it still makes me feel *awful*... I now can use the things we talked about when I stayed here, to get through it?" you finally get out.

"Yes, well that would be the goal of therapy. Tools to get you through the day."

You nod.

"I still smoke sometimes."

"Hmm."

"Jane hates it."

"Do you *want* to keep smoking?"

"Not really. I know Jane hates it and I know it's bad for me."

"Would you like to talk about strategies to get you to quit?"

"Maybe," you sigh, "Yeah. It's not a bad idea."

"Alright. Let's tackle that next session."

You frown.

"Is that all we'll do?"

"Probably. Quitting smoking is difficult. In fact, there's research in the works through the Surgeon General that cigarettes are actually addictive, though it hasn't been published yet, of course."

You nod. Makes sense.

“Why? Is there something else you’d like to talk about?”

Yeah.

Your head is being weird.

And you’re having flashbacks to things that aren’t actually traumatic.

And flashbacks to stuff that hasn’t actually happened.

And when they happen you feel sick and sometimes get nosebleeds – usually get nosebleeds.

And it is all very very very confusing and distressing.

“Um, no. It’s nothing.”

“Alright. Then that’s what we’ll tackle next time.”

“Great,” you say, “Thank you, Doctor Owens.”

“Of course.”

You shake his hand and leave the lab, walking back out to the car and getting behind the driver’s seat.

“Are you alright for practice hours?” your mom asks.

“Um...” you frown.

“You don’t have to be. I know therapy can be very exhausting,” Mom continues.

“No, I want to get more hours in,” you say firmly, starting up the car and driving very carefully through the town.

“You should speed up a little, sweetheart. You don’t want to get into an accident for being overly cautious.”

“Yeah, okay.”

You speed up some, but you don't like it much.

"So what did you talk about today?"

"Mostly about how I'm worried about Jane," you admit quietly.

"Did you talk about yourself at all?"

"Yeah, a little."

Your mom sighs.

"Honey, you can't be any help at all to Jane if you don't –"

"I *am* taking care of myself, Mom, I promise. Jane's just been... more quiet lately," you admit.

"More quiet?"

"I mean, she talks, it's not like when we first found her, but she doesn't... offer up stuff. As much. She seems like she's always lost in her head."

Mom sighs.

"I'm sorry, Michael."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because I could see this coming."

"Uh... what?"

"Don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way."

"Okay..."

"She's been bottling up all of her own pain and issues over... her entire past... this past year. Because of you, and the fact that you've needed her."

"Oh," you mumble.

Guilt

Guilt

Guilt

Guilt

Guilt –

“Michael.”

You snap out of it.

“Take deep breaths. Use what Doctor Owens has told you.”

You nod.

You focus on what you’re doing.

Drive.

Drive carefully.

Watch the road.

Stick between the lines.

Turn signal.

Break slowly.

Focus.

Focus.

Focus.

“Okay,” you mutter, “Sorry.”

“it’s fine, I’m glad you pulled yourself out of it.”

You nod.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right, though. That she’s been doing that.”

“I just hope she talks to someone about what she’s feeling.”

“Me, too,” you whisper.

“She isn’t talking to you?”

“Every time I ask about it she just glares at me until I drop the subject,” you admit tiredly.

“Well,” Mom sighs again, “You can’t force her to talk about it.”

“No,” you agree, though you feel like there’s a permanent weight in the bottom of your stomach – different than your depression weight.

It’s a worry weight.

“I can’t force her at all.”

A P R I L 1 5 1 9 8 6

“Hot off the presses! Hot off the presses! Finally, despite exam delays and that one pause I took for my cough, *finally*, we have –“

Dustin looks expectantly at Will and he immediately starts doing a drumroll.

“CHAPTER TWENTY!”

“Thank *God*,” Lucas snaps, grabbing the sheets of paper from Dustin and looking them over.

“Hey! It’s *my* turn to read first!” you shout, trying to grab it from him.

“No!” Dustin shouts, putting his arms between the two of you, “No no no. We do *not* want a repeat of the Chapter Sixteen Incident!”

“Fine,” you grumble in annoyance, “Lucas, don’t tell us what happens.”

“I won’t, I promise,” Lucas says, eagerly, pouring over the pages and

reading while he sips his juice.

“This rotation system is ridiculous. Obviously you need to type out multiple copies of each chapter for us,” Max says, grumbling.

“Right, because I can type out twenty pages *over and over and over again*. Yup, that makes sense,” Dustin grumbles, “Especially when I can’t sleep. Stupid nightmares.”

“At least do it twice!”

“No!”

“But how will you get my humorous Chewbacca quips otherwise?”

“I will wait!”

“You fool, you absolute –“

Jane is giggling next to you, her face in her hands as everyone argues around you. You look down at her to smile at her, and she blushes in response.

“What?”

"I just like your laugh, that's all."

She sticks her tongue out at you.

You want to kiss her.

“What?” she asks again, frowning at you.

“I – uh – nothing –”

“You’re acting *weird*.”

Everyone's looking at you.

You want to melt into the floor.

[illegible]

“Yeah, Mike, why are you acting weird?” Lucas teases. You glare at him.

“I’m not acting weird.”

“Mike’s acting weird!” Max chants, looking around at everyone. Dustin immediately joins in.

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“I’m *not* –“

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Guys shut up I’m trying to *read* –“

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

The only people who are not chanting in your party now are you and Lucas.

“I am not!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“Mike’s acting weird!”

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD!”

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD!”

Emboldened by the full participation of the group, the others have started shouting, pounding their fists on the table.

“Oh my *God*,” you groan.

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD!”

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD!”

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD!”

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD!”

“MIKE’S ACTING WEIRD –“

“EMINE IS ALIVE!”

Everyone shuts up, turning to look at Lucas.

“Lucas you *didn’t*,” Dustin groans.

“YOU SPOILED IT!” you shriek in fury, diving after Lucas. Lucas gets up and runs away, shouting, “YOU ALL DIDN’T LET ME READ!”

You chase after him angrily, sprinting through the halls as you chase him out of the cafeteria and down the building.

“HEY!”

You skid to a stop, your shoes squeaking against the linoleum, while Lucas runs away faster.

A teacher walks up to you, glaring.

“What *are* you doing?”

“Uh... running.”

“No running in the halls!”

“Yeah, sorry,” you say, “Um, I’ll go back to lunch.”

“You do that,” the teacher grumbles, walking off after where Lucas went. You go to sit back down, picking up the pages of Dustin’s story to read, even though you already know what happens.

APRIL 27 1986

"Mom!" you scream from the bathroom, "MOM!"

"What, honey? We have to go," she says, running up to the bathroom and looking at you with a slight glare.

"Look, we can't avoid this anymore," you grumble.

"Can't avoid *what*?"

"I need a razor."

"Michael –"

"LOOK AT MY FACE!"

Your mom sighs heavily as you point to your chin with one hand and your upper lip with the other.

"I HAVE AN AWKWARD PUBERTY BEARD, MOTHER."

"Well, you're Jewish, and we're not entirely famed for being hairless –"

"MOTHER."

"Sweetie, you know how I feel about you being around –"

"I know, Mom," you groan, "But I look like a teenager who *thinks* he can grow a beard when he *can't* so I'm just *awkward looking*. AWKWARD, MOTHER."

"Mike –"

"IT IS JANE'S BIRTHDAY."

"I'm aware, we're going to be late –"

"PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME LOOK LIKE A PEDOPHILE ON JANE'S BIRTHDAY."

You can hear Nancy cackling in another room.

“Fine! But I get to supervise you and I will keep your razor locked up in another room.”

“Fine!”

Your mom makes a motion to leave, before groaning.

“Father –“

“Yes?”

“Can you teach Mike to shave his face?”

“Don’t you have to get going?”

“This is slightly important for that to happen.”

“Alright, alright.”

Zayde comes into the room with shaving cream and a razor. He helps you to put it on and shows you how to move the razor blade against your face, and then watches you as you repeat the action.

It itches and hurts and you nick yourself in a few places.

And you’re trying to not look too closely at it.

Lest you start to remember.

And start to spiral.

And let any of your addictive urges take over.

You take a long, deep breath and hand it to your mom when you’re done and all the little hairs are off of your face.

“Alright, I’ll go put this away and then we’ll get going.”

“Thanks, Mom,” you say softly. She walks away, leaving you and Zayde alone.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

“Um... mostly,” you admit.

“Well, one day you’ll be able to grow a proper beard and you won’t have to shave anymore.”

You perk up.

“I won’t?”

“If you’re my grandson, which you are.”

You grin.

“Sweet.”

“Come on,” Zayde laughs, “You need to go wish Jane a happy birthday.”

You grin at him and run to change into something nicer, before getting into the car with your mom and Nancy.

“You have everything right?” Mom asks as you start driving, slowly, down the road.

“Yup,” you respond, focusing on the road. Driving to the cabin is the fucking *worst* with all the trees and non-roads, but you suppose you couldn’t have a better method of actually practicing how to drive.

You pull up to the house and all walk in, finding everyone mingling about and talking. Jane runs up to you happily, tackling you in a hug.

“Happy Birthday,” you murmur, pulling back from her to kiss her. She smiles up at you, blushing furiously to contrast with her black lipstick and black eyeshadow.

“Thanks,” she says, “Come on, we’re all bothering Steve.”

“Bothering Steve?” Nancy asks behind you. Jane laughs and pulls you with her into the living room.

“Okay Steve, picture this: you’re walking in the woods –“

“Oh my God you kids have got to stop this now –“

“There’s no one around. You can’t get a decent signal on your walkie.”

“Dustin I swear to God –“

“Out of the corner of your eye, you spot him...”

“Maxine –“

“*Billy Hargrove!*” everyone shouts in unison.

“I hate you. I hate all of you you little dipshits,” Steve sighs, holding his face in his hands.

“What would you do?” Lucas asks, grinning.

“I’d fucking taser him,” Steve says, a dreamy look coming on over his face.

“I’m super glad Billy moved back to California,” Max says, “And that I don’t have to talk to him except at holidays now.”

“Your dad is awful, though,” Lucas mutters.

“Yeah,” Max agrees quietly.

“Let’s not think about that right now,” Will says, “Mike’s here!”

“Please, Mike, stop the torture –“

“Nope,” you laugh at Steve’s crestfallen expression, “This is too funny.”

“Steve,” Jane asks seriously, “You’ve replaced Hopper as police chief –“

“Oh please, not another one –“

“Wait, why has he replaced me?” Hopper asks, stepping out behind a wall. The birds are on his shoulder, both screaming, and one flies over to land on your head.

You decide to do nothing about this situation, especially since this means Eddie has started to sing instead of scream.

“You’ve gone into a well needed retirement,” Jane says simply, “Now – Steve, you’ve replaced Hopper. And you hear tales of something weird happening in the woods.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake –“

“And you go to investigate these weird things. There’s a house, abandoned, in the middle of the woods...”

“Not this one, I presume?”

“No, this is where Hopper is retiring.”

“I’d go to Florida, thank you *very* much.”

“Yeah right,” Jane laughs, “Anyways – you find a weird shadow creature living in the house –“

“Okay then!” Hopper shouts, “You know what, Mike being here means it’s a good time for *leaven free cake and presents!*”

“Leaven free cake?” you ask in confusion.

“Yeah, I have a normal cake for me,” Jane grins, “But we made this one for you guys.”

“Thank you,” you beam, leaning in and kissing her on the cheek, “Was it hard?”

“Well, I made it, so,” Mrs. Byers rolls her eyes.

“I helped,” Hopper protests.

“You bought the ingredients!” Mrs. Byers smirks.

“And I helped you mix it!”

Jane looks at you with the most pained expression and it makes you snort.

“Barely! You just made a mess!”

“I did not! My job was very important! And I haven’t been sleeping well because of those damn dreams I’ve been having – ”

“That’s not an excuse!”

“Okay we have a cake you guys can all eat!” Jane says hurriedly before the bickering can continue, “Let’s all sit!”

Everyone sits around the table as presents are piled on Jane, Jane eagerly taking them and opening them. She receives what you’d expect – new punk albums, cd’s, a concert ticket, and clothing.

Except for the big present –

“Alright,” Hopper says as Chester chews on wrapping paper and Jane giggles at the bird’s antics, “One second and I’ll bring out my present.”

“Okay,” Jane says happily, though she’s clearly focusing on the bird’s antics.

Hopper leaves for a moment and then comes back in, bringing out a –

“A *guitar*?” Jane whispers, her eyes widening.

“Yup,” Hopper beams, handing it to her. Her face breaks into a huge grin, before she tackles Hopper to the ground with a hug, making him grunt in pain.

“Kid –“

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you –“

“You’ll have to be serious about your lessons!” Hopper grunts as they both get up, looking at her with raised eyebrows, “You can’t slack on them.”

“I won’t I won’t I won’t I won’t I won’t –“

“And it’s just an acoustic guitar, I do *not* have the energy for that

amount of loudness –“

“I love it I love it I love it I love it –“

“Jane I can show you some chords,” Jonathan offers, grinning.

“Yes yes yes yes yes –“

“First, she should open Mike’s present,” Mom says, smirking.

“Um, can I give her my present in private?” you ask quietly. Everyone nods and starts mingling about as you and Jane go to her room, alone, sitting on her bed.

Your heart pounds loudly in your throat even though you *didn’t give it permission to*.

You’re just giving her a present for the love of everything –

“What is it?” Jane asks softly, looking at you happily.

“Um... right,” you pull out the gift and hand it to her, smiling, “Here.”

She opens it, to find two things – a blank, leather-bound notebook, and another notebook, with words written in it.

“What... is this?” she asks, frowning.

“Open them,” you say, smiling.

She opens the blank one and reads aloud, “Memories Volume Two.”

She looks at you in confusion, tilting her head to the side.

“I loved that book you wrote me,” you murmur, holding her hands in yours tightly, “Even the bad parts –“

“Even the –“

“Yes, even that.”

“Okay...”

“And I don’t want you to stop writing.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I think it’s good for you,” you continue, tucking a curl of her hair behind her ear, “And your writing has really improved since you started. Your reading, too.”

She smiles and blushes again.

“And... I want to read more of it. What you think, about all of this. Our lives together,” you whisper, and your voice is a little hoarse.

She leans in and kisses you, and it’s a deep kiss, the kind that makes your whole body feel absolutely weak and your mind wiped blank, and it makes your heart pound even more.

“U... Uh... Um –“

“What’s the other one?” Jane asks.

“Well, for me, Doctor Owens told me to think more about the future,” you explain, “About where I’d like to go in the future and what I’d like to do in my life. I managed to fill up a whole notebook with it. It’s not like... plans, like ‘oh I want a house at the end of the street with two – point – five kids or something. But it’s just... I dunno... images? Scenes? Thoughts about stuff I hope will happen. Like... I dunno, just read it,” you finish.

Jane opens the book and murmurs out loud, “*One day we’ll be sitting by a fireplace. The snow will be falling around outside, and it’ll look cold and dark. But we won’t notice at all...*”

She looks up at you and smiles.

“Thank you, Mike.”

“Yeah,” you say, blushing furiously. You lean in to kiss her again, and she kiss you back softly, wrapping her arms tightly around your neck.

You can’t help but let out a squeak.

She pulls back from you and smirks.

“Why do you always do that?”

“Do – what?”

“Squeak.”

“*Squeak?*”

“Squeak!”

“Uh... I dunno,” you say.

You don’t want to say it out loud.

The unspoken fact that your relationship was growing up along with you has to *remain unspoken*.

For some reason you just...

You know...

You can’t talk about it...

Not yet...

You don’t know what will happen but you don’t think it will be good.

“Mike,” Jane glares at you.

“What?”

“Friends don’t lie, especially boyfriends.”

You sigh heavily.

“I dunno, just, kissing feels nice.”

She nods, “Why was that hard to say?”

“Uh... I dunno. I’m being stupid I guess.”

She glares at you for another minute, before shrugging.

“Alright. Let’s go back. I want to try out the guitar!”

You beam at her and walk out with her.

You really hope the shoe won’t drop any time soon.

M A Y 1 0 1 9 8 6

You are so proud of Will you could cry.

He’s up there in the synagogue, chanting along with the Torah, using the pointer to go along with the Hebrew words. He gets a few mixed up here and there (he just happens to be chanting the Torah Portion *you* chanted when *you* became a Bar Mitzvah) but he’s going along almost perfectly, and he looks fairly confident while he does it somehow.

Next to you Jane is listening intently, her brow furrowed as she tries to follow along with the translation in the book. Dustin is awake, but clearly not paying attention nearly as much; Lucas seems to be nodding off, and Max is just straight up asleep. Hopper and Mrs. Byers are behind you, with Hopper coughing frequently. Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy all sit next to them, where your Mom is near you, with Holly.

You nod at Jane and she looks over at your sleeping pals and glares a little bit. She tilts her head ever so slightly, making both Lucas and Max move in their seats.

Max jumps in hers, now awake, and turns slowly to glare at Jane. Jane grins back, while Lucas just groans quietly.

“Shhh,” Mrs. Byers hisses next to you all, and you all sit more quietly, Jane looking at you with a smile.

You smile back.

It’s one of those moments where you just can’t believe she exists.

Will finishes his Torah portion and the service continues on, before

everyone breaks for the small party being thrown afterwards.

You run up to Will and hug him and he grins at you, looking nervous but happy.

“You did great man!” you cheer, running up to him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“You couldn’t tell that I was, ya know, completely new at this, and doing this way later than anyone else, because I hadn’t been raised Jewish yet?”

“Nope, not at all!”

“Phew,” Will nods.

“Is Jonathan going to do this?” Jane asks curiously, looking at you with a tilted head.

“No, probably not,” Will admits, “He’d have to fully convert, he was too old when Mom came back to this.”

“Oh,” Jane frowns, “Is converting hard?”

“Fairly,” you say, “You have to learn a *lot*.”

She nods, a concentrated expression on her face, “Hmm.”

“Guys! There’s *food*!” Max shouts.

“Duh?” Dustin looks at her in confusion.

“Dustin, I’m not talking to you.”

“What? *Still*?!”

“I have *not* forgiven you for that last chapter –“

“It needed to happen!”

“Needed my ass –“

“Guys, this is a religious event –“ Will protests, running forward to them all.

“HERSHIEN SKYWALKER WAS A PRECIOUS, GOOD SOUL AND HE DID NOT DESERVE TO BE MURDERED BY DARTH KIOL –“

“HIS MURDER WILL BEGIN ANAKIN’S PATH TO THE DARK SIDE!”

“GUYS!”

You snort quietly and Jane giggles next to you.

You lean down to grab a glass of punch and then pull yourself back up, looking around the room.

Jane isn’t next to you anymore.

“Wha –“

“Good job, Michael. I know you didn’t want to do that today but we’re still proud of you,” your Mom says, walking up to you. Your dad is –

What –

Dad –

Why –

“Mike?”

You look and see Jane.

“Flashback,” you whisper softly.

Jane looks worried sick.

“Come on, Michael, don’t cause a scene *here*,” your father says in the past.

“I want to go home –“

“This is your Bar Mitzvah. At least look a *little* happy about it –“

“Mike?”

“Help,” you whisper, trying to remove yourself from the past. It’s as though you have one foot in one place, and the other in the other.

Jane grabs your arm and pulls you away, back outside to the parking lot. You sit on the curb and hold your head in your hands, staring down at the pavement.

“Mike?”

You look up at her, sniffing.

“Your nose is bleeding.”

“Oh...”

You take out a hankerchief and wipe off your nose.

“Your nose bleeds every time this happens.”

“Not *every* time.”

“Every time, Mike.”

She looks so worried you wish you could say something.

“Look, it’s nothing.”

“Have you talked to Doctor Owens yet?”

“We’re... still working on my smoking.”

Jane makes a sound of annoyance, crossing her arms tightly in front of her chest, as if to shrink it.

“What’s wrong?” you ask her softly.

“Nothing,” she mutters.

“C’mon, Jane –“

“You need to talk to him about this! This isn’t normal!”

“Nothing’s normal.”

“You know what I mean...”

“I... know. I know I need to talk to him about this...”

“Mike?”

You look up to see the rest of the party standing there, looking at you in worry.

“You ran out of there, what’s going on?” Lucas asks.

“Um...”

You look at Jane, frowning. She studies you for a moment, before turning to the others.

“Mike’s been having weird visions.”

“*Jane* –“

“Weird visions?” Will asks, his face paling.

“Uh... yeah.”

“Okay, you have to tell us now,” Dustin demands angrily.

“I – what –“

“Man, we all know what happens when we bottle things up,” Lucas agrees, “You gotta talk to us about this, okay?”

“Alright... fine,” Mike sighs heavily, “So... uh... starting last summer I’d get flashbacks to stuff in the past. I figured it was a PTSD thing, you know? It was pretty much always to stuff that was bad that happened, like Jane getting lost in the Upside Down after defeating the Demogorgon, or Will collapsing on the field, or all those people dying because of the Demo-Dogs, or us all going into the tunnels and running away from the Demo-Dogs... stuff like that.”

“Yeah?” Dustin asks.

“But... starting last fall I’d get... more of them. And they weren’t just bad things. A lot of them were just memories, you know? Just normal memories. And over the summer when this happened I’d feel nauseous, but now I was...”

“Actually throwing up,” Jane says quietly.

“Like, remember Halloween?”

“I thought you were just throwing up because of alcohol,” Lucas says, frowning.

“Yeah,” you sigh, “Well, I guess I wasn’t. And then... when I came back from Doctor Owens... I had a vision of something that hasn’t actually happened.”

“Something that hasn’t happened?” Will asks breathlessly.

“Like... the future?” Max asks.

“Oh man – can you see into the future? Mike, that’s *awesome* –“ Dustin shouts.

“I don’t know if it was the future. It was just kind of weird and disjointed,” you interrupt, shaking your head.

“And you started to get nosebleeds during it,” Jane mutters quietly.

“Wait... like... Jane using her powers... nosebleeds?” Lucas asks, his eyes wide.

“Um... well I thought it was just cause the air was dry,” you admit.

“But the air’s not dry now,” Jane mutters, now sounding a little angry.

“No,” you agree softly.

“But Mike’s not a psychic! He doesn’t have the number on his arm, his mom wasn’t in that study thing, and it’s not like being psychic is a

disease, you can't *transfer* it, it must just be a coincidence," Lucas insists.

"I mean... you're not wrong," you agree, "But what are the visions?"

"I don't know, but can you even *control* them?" Lucas asks.

"I... haven't tried."

Everyone looks at you, and you look at everyone else.

"You should try," Dustin says.

"Look, I can see into the past any time I want, it's called *remembering things* –"

"Yeah, but this is different. You've said so yourself," Jane murmurs, "You see things that you wouldn't remember."

You swallow and look back at her.

"It's just a weird mental illness thing."

"I dunno, man," Will mutters, "I don't think you can count on that."

You look at him, and he looks at you.

"How would I even *try*?"

"Try to... I dunno, try to see like, what will happen tonight," Dustin offers.

"Right, because I know how to *control* this madness –"

"Mike."

You turn to look at Jane, and she looks at you, and she looks upset.

"Can you drive us back to your house – or my house – or somewhere?"

"Um... no? I'd need my mom."

She nods, "Alright. Everyone," she turns back to the group, "After the party, we're going to my house. No adults."

"No *adults* –"

"I want to find out more ourselves before we involve them," she whispers quietly.

"Alright," you agree. Everyone else piles back into the room, but you hold Jane back.

"Jane?"

"What?" she asks softly.

"What's wrong?"

"I made you sick," she mutters.

"You can't have!"

"Who else could have?"

You look at each other for a long time.

"I made you sick," she repeats.

"Jane..."

"I'm a monster and I made you sick and I hurt everyone I touch and I'm a black hole," she says, before turning and running into the gym before you can say anything more.

You spend the rest of the party trying to get her to talk to you, but she pretty thoroughly avoids you, making you fall prey to your own terrible thoughts.

Awful

Terrible

Never should have told her

Worthless

Waste of space

Making her hate herself

Terrible

Terrible

Terrible

Terrible

Terrible –

You force yourself to sit down in a chair and think about other things.

You think about kissing her.

You think about Will reading the Torah.

You think and you think and you think and you think and you breathe and you breathe and you breathe and you breathe –

Until you finally manage to pull yourself out of it again.

The party winds down and you all go up to Steve together.

“Hey, Steve?” you ask.

“Yeah?” he says, looking startled and putting down his glass of wine.

“Can you drive us all to the cabin?” you ask.

“The – what now?”

“The cabin.”

“Uh... why?”

“We want to test something,” Dustin says.

“But – I was going to –“

“What’s going on?”

Hopper walks up to you all.

“Uh...” you falter.

“We wanted to do an experiment at the cabin,” Jane says firmly, “Alone.”

“You and Mike? Alone?”

Hopper glares at you out of the corner of his eye.

“No, all of us,” she gestures to the group, “And Steve.”

“I thought you asked for the night off so you could hang out with Jonathan and Nancy?” Hopper asks, looking over at Steve in confusion.

“I *did*, they sprung this on me too.”

“Why can’t I help? I’d like to go home,” Hopper says.

“Has to be Steve,” Dustin says firmly.

Hopper sighs, “Steve, you can reschedule. I’ll work late tonight.”

“But –“

“The fun of being a father. Just let me know when you’d like off later.”

“Alright...”

He walks away to go talk to your Mom.

“I can’t believe this. Alright, let’s go,” Steve groans, and you all run out to his car. He drives through the town and into the woods, before reaching the cabin.

“Alright, you little shits, what the fuck is going on –“

“Mike,” Jane says, turning to you.

“Yeah?” you ask quietly.

“We’re going to do the sensory deprivation thing.”

“Is there a bathtub?” you ask in confusion.

She nods. She runs into her room and pulls out the kiddie pool from so long ago.

“No – what the fuck – what is going on –“ Steve shouts.

“We’re dunking Mike,” Jane says simply.

“Do we have *salt*?” Dustin asks in amazement.

“We have an emergency cash out back,” Jane explains, “It’s for... well, if I need to use my powers.”

“Fuck,” Lucas breathes.

“Why does *Mike* need a *sensory deprivation tank*?” Steve roars.

“Look, Steve –“ Dustin pulls him aside to start explaining.

“Lucas, go get the hose from the back,” Jane orders. Lucas nods and Max runs out with him.

“I’ll get the salt,” Will offers, running down the steps.

You turn to Jane as she busies herself setting up the kiddie pool.

“Jane – talk to me –“

“Busy.”

“*Jane*.”

She looks up at you, and mutters, “What?”

You swallow, “Are you breaking up with me?”

“What? No!” she shouts, looking shocked.

“But –“

“I’m mad at *me*,” she whispers.

“Jane...”

“I’m sorry you fell in love with me,” she mutters quietly, and before you can correct her she moves on, helping the others fill the bath with water.

“Okay, there’s a problem with this plan,” you say, as the kiddie pool essentially fills the entire living room, water sloshing around as Dustin checks the temperature and Steve swears consistently in the back of the room.

“What?” Lucas asks, giving you a look.

“I do *not* want to get this suit wet.”

Everyone looks at each other.

“Mike, when Jane did this she was in her dress,” Dustin says, shaking her head.

“This is a nice suit!”

“You’re also a boy and can just be in your underwear,” Will says, shrugging.

“Uh...”

You blush rapidly, trying to not make eye contact with Jane.

Jane frowns at you, “What’s wrong with that?”

“Uh... nothing... I... I... g-guess...”

“When you’re done, we’ll put on the white noise from the TV just in case,” Jane says, “And here is a mask for you.”

You nod and take it from her. You turn away from everyone, wishing

you could melt into the floor, hoping that Jane wasn't watching.

Or hoping she was.

Or

Or

Fucking hell

You grit your teeth and think about anything else and then put on the blind fold. You stumble into the pool, floating.

You're weightless.

"Good," you hear Jane murmur, "Dustin, the noise."

"Right."

The static fills your ears.

Everything is quiet.

It's as though you're just... nowhere.

It's only you in the world.

You breathe in and out, slowly.

"What am I supposed to be doing?" you ask.

"Try to go into the future."

"The – what?"

"Try to go to tomorrow. Focus on tomorrow's date. Focus on some things you think you'll be doing tomorrow. Focus on it."

"Oh... okay..."

You do so.

You're surrounded by blackness.

Pitch blackness.

Emptiness.

The floor underneath your feet is water.

You're overwhelmed, to say the least.

"Hello? *Hello?!?*" you scream, spinning around on your heels.

"Mike, Mike, *breathe*," you hear the soft voice of Jane. It surrounds you. It's like it's coming from the sky.

"J- Jane?"

"Mike, breathe. Keep focusing on tomorrow."

You nod,

You focus.

You're suddenly surrounded on all sides by your house.

You look over to see your Mom walking over to you – you're sitting at the table.

"Alright Michael, you should really work on your homework, you have that big history test this week."

"Yeah, Mom, I will," you say, without really controlling yourself.

"Good good. We're very proud of you!" she says in response.

"Thanks Mom!"

You want to be out.

You feel dizzy and completely sick to your stomach.

You force yourself to stop thinking about it.

You pull off the blindfold and struggle to sit up.

“Mike?” Jane asks, looking at you with wide eyes.

You wipe blood from your upper lip.

“I don’t know what I saw, but... I saw something.”

“I guess we just see if that happens tomorrow?” Dustin asks quietly.

“This is insane. This is completely insane. This is insane –“

“Steve, shut up!”

You look at Jane in worry and her face matches yours.

What was happening?

Notes for the Chapter:

cackles madly

Thank you all for the wonderful comments!!!! Please
please PLEASE keep them coming, thank you :) :) :) :)
they really helped in getting me to write tonight!!!
You have no idea hahaha I was super stressed ^_^

24. Time's Up

Notes for the Chapter:

FUCKING TRIGGER WARNINGS for:

- Trans-ignorant (I hesitate to say transphobic bc it really is ignorance rather than hatred???? but transphobic technically. Cissexist definitely)
- discussions of biological sex, sexual reproduction & puberty
- Discussions of menstruation
- Allusions to childhood sexual abuse
- Allusions to teenage sexuality
- Allusions to domestic abuse
- Self Loathing spirals

J U N E 9 1 9 8 6

J A N E H O P P E R

You sit next to the birds in the living room, tuning your guitar. Each note rings out and makes the birds call out to you, and all the sound is a little much, but you like it.

Satisfied with the tuning, you start practicing the chords, strumming them and letting them ring out. You only know a few so far, but you're proud of yourself for knowing that much.

A knock rings out on the door.

"Coming!" you shout, swinging your guitar on the strap around to be on your back. You run up to the front door and open it to see Lucas.

"Lucas?" you ask in confusion, stepping aside for him to walk in. He looks frantic.

"We have to tell the adults."

"*Lucas.*"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't keep insisting, but we have

to. We have to, right? We have to.”

You frown at him.

You're a Monster

“Lucas, we've all *discussed* this –“

“He gets sick, Jane! He vomits and he gets woozy and he practically had to skip his history final for it! *History*, Jane!”

“I know...”

You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster You're a Monster –

“And we know it's some weird psychic power thing now! We know that! Because multiple times now he's gone to the future and it's been what he saw, or he's done something and managed to change it, or he's done things and it's changed only slightly, and I mean great, free will exists, but – but – but – This is just crazy, this is crazy, this is crazy –“

You're a Monster You're a Monster –

“Lucas!”

He turns around and looks at you, panting a little bit.

You hurt him you got him sick you hurt him you got him sick you're a monster you got him sick you hurt him you're a monster –

“Lucas, you need to *breathe*.”

He nods, putting his hands on his knees and lowering his head, breathing in and out slowly. You pat him on the back and wait until he finishes, his breathing slowing back to normal.

Monster Terrible Terrible Monster Monster Terrible Monster Terrible Terrible Monster Monster Monster –

“Sorry.”

“Why did you come all the way out here to freak out?” you ask seriously.

You hurt Mike You hurt Mike You hurt Mike You hurt Mike –

“Uh... Cause Dustin’s at the animal shelter, Mike’s at make up school, Max is leaving for California today – which, you know, isn’t helping the whole ‘freaking out’ thing –“

“Obviously,” you murmur.

“Will is at home and his mom’s there and I knew you were alone without the Chief?”

“Right,” you sigh, “Right. Okay, I guess that makes sense.”

You have been feeling kind of achy lately and you just wanted to be alone, alone where you can’t hurt anyone anymore, but you don’t blame Lucas.

It’s all your fault it’s all your fault it’s all your fault it’s all your fault it’s all your fault it’s all your fault –

“Side note,” Lucas sighs, “I’m worried about Max.”

“Another bruise?” you ask quietly. He nods.

“Ever since Billy left she’s had more of them. We all know what they are but...” Lucas takes in a shaky breath, “I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t know either,” you whisper, “It scares me.”

“It scares me too. You know her parents don’t know about us?”

“They *don’t*?”

“Nope. They know we’re friends but they don’t know we’re dating. And since our parents don’t really talk to anyone else it’s not like any adults have spilled the beans.”

“Shit,” you whisper.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Chester lets out a whistle and flaps over to Lucas, sitting on his shoulder. Lucas immediately smiles.

“Hey buddy. Want some scritchles?”

You snort as he calms a little while he pays attention to the soft bird.

“Well at least Max will be at her dad’s for the summer...”

“Yeah, away from that terrible stepdad,” Lucas grumbles.

“She’ll be bored, but you can call her maybe?” you offer.

“Yeah, I’ll try that,” Lucas sighs, “Anyways... the reason I came.”

“Right,” you say.

Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster
Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster
—

“It’s been nearly a month, Jane. A *month*.”

“Yeah...”

You’re a Monster

“And I get that Will had his art show, and that we all had finals and essays and things, and Will didn’t want to cause problems when Jonathan was bummed about not getting to go to NYU, and I know that Hopper’s been *really tired* with all those nightmares and everything, but this is *serious*.” Lucas is pacing a hole into the carpet as he talks, his arms crossed around his chest.

“Time just got away from us, I guess,” you murmur, watching him in half amusement, half distress.

You’re a Monster

“Well now I’m claiming time *back*. Today’s the first day of summer vacation – weekends don’t count – Mike’s getting worse and having

more and more of those visions, and they keep making him feel sick, and he can't afford that, not when he has to play catch up in order to be allowed to be a sophomore next year –“

“Lucas –“

It's all your fault, you Monster

“And with that and Dustin and Hopper's *weird dreams* and *coughing* – have you realized that, they're *both* doing it – I just feel like something is coming, I don't care that we closed the gate, *something is coming* –“

“Wait, you think that has to do with –“

It's all your fault you're awful you're a Monster you made Mike sick

“No, I don't, because Mike started to get those visions *before* all the Dustin and Hopper stuff started to happen, but I think that there are too many weird things going on and I'm getting nervous, everyone else is too relaxed because like nightmares? Pretty normal usually especially for Hopper and maybe Dustin is just finally succumbing to our fucking shared trauma or whatever. And Mike's thing? Well the adults *don't know* so they don't know to be *freaking out* –“

“Lucas –“

It's all your fault it's all your fault you'll never escape everything will keep getting worse and it's all your fault

“And everything's a fucking ridiculous mess and I'm really freaking out, Jane, I'm freaking the *fuck* out, and we have to do *something*, we have to do something we have to tell the adults we have to tell someone –“

“Lucas!”

Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster

He stops pacing, whirling to face you.

“*What?*”

“You need to take a *deep breath*,” you urge.

Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster Monster
Monster Monster Monster

Lucas glares at you, but he breathes in and out slowly again.

“Good.”

“Jane, just answer me a question.”

“Uh... sure?”

You’re a Monster You’re a Monster You’re a Monster You’re a
Monster You’re a Monster You’re a –

“Do you remember? What it was like when you were first using your powers?”

“Um...”

You swallow.

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Don’t –

“No, I was really little. Like, a baby, probably.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Lucas sits down in a huff, making Chester chirp in annoyance. You sit
next to him, frowning.

Don’t think about it Don’t think about it Don’t think about it Don’t

"I don't know how to not panic about this," Lucas admits after a while.

"Neither do I..."

"He's my best friend."

"He's my boyfriend."

"I just want him to be okay."

"Same."

You both smile weakly at each other.

monster... monster.... monster... monster... monster...

"Remember when you really didn't trust me at the beginning and it made you so on edge it's like your head exploded?"

"I maintain that was the *rational* choice," he says, sticking his tongue out at you.

Yup you're a monster you're a monster you're a monster you're a monster

"I'm not really arguing with you," you laugh.

He looks at you seriously, "I'm sorry, by the way."

"For what?"

"Not trusting you."

You shrug, "I was... well, I don't blame you."

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

He smiles a little.

"I'm sorry for not... explaining everything. For being so scared. And then hurting you," you choke out.

"You said sorry at the time –"

"I still am..."

It's all. Your. Fault.

"Well I still forgive you."

He bumps your shoulder with his and you bump it back, before pulling out your guitar.

"Wanna hear what I've learned?" you offer.

Stop thinking about it stop thinking about it stop thinking about it stop thinking –

"Yeah!" Lucas nods. You pluck out some chords – E, A, G, the ever impossible B, E minor, E diminished – and beam at him.

"Nice – you could almost write a song with that," he jokes.

"Don't tempt me, I've been considering it."

"You're *kidding* –"

"I'm too afraid, though. I can't sing."

"You can't sing?" Lucas asks, frowning.

"Can *you*?"

"Heck no," Lucas shakes his head, "Just let me build model rockets in peace."

You laugh a little.

“But you don’t have to be able to sing to write songs. Ever heard any Bob Dylan?”

“No...”

“Jonathan should *not* be the sole person in charge of your musical education!”

“Hopper gave up after a while when he realized our tastes do not overlap.”

“Well, you probably wouldn’t like his music then. But he can write *great* songs. Except, he’s an *awful* singer.”

“Awful?”

“Yeah, his voice sounds like it’s being rubbed between *gravel*.”

You giggle.

“So you could write like, the *best* songs in the world, but you don’t have to sing them.”

“Thanks, Lucas,” you laugh, “Maybe I’ll try.”

You both sit in silence as you strum the guitar, humming to yourself.

“Jane... I really am worried.”

“I am too,” you murmur.

It’s your fault.

It’s your fault.

It’s your fault.

It’s your fault.

It’s your –

“Can we... *please*... come up with a plan to... tell someone?”

You sigh.

“This is summer, so. When we see how Mike’s doing with school and everything. In a few weeks. I *promise*. We’ll tell them.”

MonsterMonsterMonsterMonsterMonster –

“Okay,” Lucas breathes with relief.

You feel all hot and sticky.

“I wish we had a fan,” you grumble.

“I think we might have an extra one? I can bring it here.”

“That would be a freaking *lifesaver*, thank you.”

Lucas nods and gets up to bring Chester back to the cage to eat food. As he comes back, he stops in his tracks.

“Uh... Jane?”

“Yeah?”

“Um... fuck.”

“What?” you look at him with wide eyes, putting down your guitar,
“What – what is it?”

“Uh... do you have any tampons or anything?”

“Tam... what?”

His eyes widen even more.

“Shit.”

“What? What is going on? What is happening?”

“Jane have you gotten your period before?”

“My... what?”

“*Shit.*”

“What’s going on?”

“Okay. Fuck. Why do *I* have to be the one to – fuck. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

“Lucas you’re really, really scaring me right now.”

“Okay. Don’t... freak out. But you’re bleeding.”

“*What?*”

“Bleeding from... uh... um... shit. From your... you know...”

“My *what?*”

You look all around frantically, before you see a dark brown stain coming from between your legs.

“What?!” you scream, jumping up.

“This would be the freaking out I mentioned –“

“WHAT IS THIS?!”

“Jane, calm down –“

“WHAT IS IT WHAT IS IT WHAT IS IT WHAT IS IT –“

The birds are screaming with you and some of the new glass in the windows shatter.

“JANE!”

You look to see Lucas holding onto your shoulders and shaking you.

“Jane *calm down*. It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.”

You take a deep breath and look at him with tears streaming down your eyes.

“What – is it?”

"I am *not* the right person to tell you this."

"But –"

"It's completely normal, I *promise*."

"But it's *brown* –"

"Yeah this is why I'm not the right person to tell you. Look, I'm going to call Joyce and get her to come over right away okay?"

"Ok-kay..."

"You just sit down and try to breathe. I promise, you're fine. Absolutely, positively fine."

"Is this why I've been achey... down there... so much?"

"Yeah. Look, I'm serious. I'm *not* the right person."

"Oh... okay..."

"I'll stay here with you, I know you're scared."

You nod frantically.

You're finding it harder to talk.

"Okay, give me one second."

He runs over to the phone and picks it up, calling quickly.

"Hey – Hey Will – oh that's sweet – yeah I'm actually calling for your mom... Oh good... yeah can you just tell her to come to Hop's cabin? I'm over here with Jane and... uh... just have her bring... you know... stuff for periods. Yeah, she doesn't have anything. Um... yeah it's her first one. If you could do that that would be *extremely* helpful. Thanks! Yeah tell her to come now. Thanks."

Lucas hangs up and looks at you in worry.

"Are you doing okay?"

You shake your head frantically.

Why are you bleeding why are you bleeding why are you bleeding
why are you bleeding why are you bleeding why are you bleeding
why why why why why why why why why –

“Jane it’s going to be okay. I promise. I promise this is normal. I
promise. I *promise*.”

You nod frantically.

You want to believe him.

But you can’t get words out.

“Just... uh... just sit down, okay? And take deep breaths. And try to
relax. And I’ll stay here with you, I promise, okay?” Lucas rambles.

You nod again.

You feel sick to your stomach.

Everything is spinning.

What... is... happening...

Lucas wraps his arm around you and just keeps whispering that it’s
okay it’s okay it’s okay it’s okay while you sit together and wait for
Mrs. Byers.

You’re sticky and hot and achy and awful and a monster and
everything is awful awful awful awful –

Knocks ring out on from the door, making the birds – which are in
their cage now – scream again.

Lucas runs to the door and opens it, letting Mrs. Byers inside. She
runs over to you, smiling weakly.

“Okay honey, do you want Lucas to go?”

“Why would I want Lucas to go?” you whisper.

“Um...” Lucas mutters.

“Because we’re going to talk about some very private things,” Mrs. Byers murmurs, “Stuff about you, and your body.”

“My... what?”

“Your body. I know this is all really stressful and confusing. I need you to take deep breaths.”

“Oh... oh-kay...”

“But it’s one hundred percent normal, and happens to every girl. I promise.”

“It does?”

“It does.”

“Okay...”

“So do you want Lucas to go?”

You shake your head.

“Alright then, sweetheart,” Mrs. Byers sighs “Lucas, are *you* okay with being here?”

“I have a girlfriend, Mrs. Byers.”

“Fair point. Alright,” she takes a deep breath, “I... okay. Okay.”

“Mrs. Byers?” you whisper.

“I’m just psyching myself up, Jane,” she explains, “Okay. Here is a pad.”

She hands you a weird looking square package.

“What –“

“It’s inside. Go to the bathroom and put it in the middle of your underwear.”

“Uh... okay...”

“It’ll soak up the blood.”

You nod and do just that, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. You walk back outside and she smiles at you.

“It’s going to be okay, okay?”

You nod mutely.

She pulls out a piece of paper from her bag, and starts to draw on it. The drawings are awkward and weird looking.

“How much do you know about the differences between boys and girls?”

“Um... nothing... Girls have breasts and boys don’t? Girls give birth to babies and boys don’t?”

“Right. Okay. So the real difference is with what parts you have downstairs,” she says, pointing at her own abdomen, “Girls have vaginas, and boys have penises.”

“Oh... kay...”

“So,” she points to her drawings, “This is what we have. It’s a uterus, connected to a vagina.”

“Okay...”

“The uterus is where babies grow when girls get pregnant. An egg travels from the ovary,” she points, “Down the fallopian tube,” she points again, “And settles in the wall of the uterus. Blood and other stuff fills up there so it can feed the egg if it gets fertilized.”

“With... what?”

“Sperm. I’ll get to that. When your egg *doesn’t* get fertilized, though, all the blood sheds out, and goes out through the vagina. That’s your period.”

“Oh...”

“It lasts for about a week, sometimes less, sometimes more.”

“How often does it happen?”

“Once a month.”

“Oh... what’s the achy feeling I’ve gotten?”

“That’s the week before your period. It’s called PMS. Your uterus is getting ready to shed the lining, so it hurts.”

“Oh...”

“Now,” she points to the other diagram, “This is a penis.”

“Okay...”

“It’s what boys have instead.”

“Do they get periods?”

“No, no.”

Lucas mutters, “Thank God,” from the corner.

“So there are two parts to make a baby. You make an egg, and a boy makes sperm. They make the sperm here, in the testicles,” she points to another thing on the diagram.

“Do you remember some of the stuff about sexual reproduction from bio, Jane?” Lucas asks quietly from the corner.

You nod.

You only knew that two haploid gametes came together to make a diploid zygote, though...

It wasn’t a major part of the class...

“Right well the egg is one gamete and the sperm is the other,” Lucas finishes. He’s steadily looking away from both you and Mrs. Byers.

“The boy releases the sperm into the vagina through the penis –“

“Wait, so it goes *inside*?”

“Yup.”

Your mind is spinning.

You can’t think clearly.

Everything’s a blur.

Don’t think about it don’t think about it don’t think about it don’t think about it –

“So, to make a baby, that’s basically what happens,” Mrs. Byers explains, “The penis goes inside, sperm is released, the sperm goes up,” she points, “into the uterus, and then fertilizes the egg.”

“Okay... that’s what sex is, right?”

“Yup.”

“Okay...”

“How much of this did you know already?”

“Some snippets...”

“Do you have any other questions?”

Don’t think about it don’t think about it don’t think about it DON’T THINK ABOUT IT DON’T THINK ABOUT IT DON’T THINK ABOUT IT DON’T THINK DON’T DON’T DON’T –

“Um... what are boobs, then?”

“Alright, so let’s talk about puberty. Have you heard that word?”

You nod.

“You and your friends are going through that right now. So, kids can’t do any of this. Have sex, make babies, have periods. Their

bodies aren't ready to do it."

You nod mutely.

DON'T DON'T DON'T DON'T DON'T DON'T DON'T DON'T DON'T
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"So, as you get older and become more like an adult, your bodies get ready for that. And some other things change too, to make you more like an adult. Boys get taller and wider in the torso," she gestures to herself, "And their voices get lower. They also start to grow hair on their faces, armpits, chests, legs, groin, and back."

"We... get hair too... right?" you whisper, "I have..."

"Yes," she nods, "We get hair in the groin and on the legs. Sometime some on our faces, too."

You nod again.

"You can shave off the hair if you want to, though."

"Okay..."

"And our bodies get curvier, including the breasts, so we can have babies."

"Are... we feed our babies milk from the breasts, right?"

"Exactly."

You nod quietly.

"Okay. There's more to it than that, but I think that's enough for today. It's a lot of information to take in," Mrs. Byers says.

"Yeah," you whisper.

"Are you going to be okay?"

“Can you stay?”

“Of course. How are you feeling?”

“Like I need a shower.”

“Okay.”

“Is a pad the only way to stop the bleeding?”

“You can also use a tampon.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a wad of cotton that you stick up your vagina to soak up the blood instead.”

“Um... okay. Why is the blood brown?”

“Because it’s old.”

“Oh.”

“When you start having them more regularly – it’s going to be irregular for a while in the beginning – then it’ll be more reddish.”

“Okay.”

“And you might have some mucus.”

Lucas groans from the corner.

“Mucus?”

“Yeah. Red blob things. It’s natural.”

“Okay...”

“Now, you can go shower and change into some comfortable clothing, alright? I’m going to clean up the blood stain. Lucas, do you want to go out and get her some chocolate? I brought a heating pad for her cramps but it would be good if she had some comfort food.”

Lucas nods and runs out like a bat out of hell.

Don't think about it Don't think about it Don't think about it Don't
think about it Don't think about it Don't think about it Don't Don't
Don't Don't Don't Don't Don't Don't Don't Don't Don't –

“Sweetie, you can go shower.”

You nod, getting up and walking to the shower.

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don't don't don't...

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Don't...

J U N E 1 0 1 9 8 6

“I am so so so so so –“

“Don't say it –“

“I just wish I could have come over yesterday.”

“I know why you couldn't...”

“Stupid school. Stupid stupid stupid –“

“Mike, please stop.”

“Okay...”

“I'm glad you're here now.”

“You are?”

“I am.”

He smiles weakly at you, sitting next to you. In his hands he has bags filled with things, though you can't see what they have.

You're lying on the couch, and you ache and you hurt, and you just want to sleep for many years.

Primarily so you stop thinking.

"What did you bring?"

"I brought more pads and chocoalte for you because I know that you'll need them and I was at the store anyway so I got them and I didn't want to make Hopper do it really –"

"Mike you didn't have to..."

"No I wanted to! I didn't know what size you needed –"

"Mike –"

"So I got some variety packs –"

"Mike you didn't have to –"

"I wanted to!"

You smile a little at him, "Thanks."

"Of course," he murmurs, leaning in and kissing you, "How are you feeling?"

"Awful. Too hot and sticky."

"Yeah, it's way too hot in here. I agree."

"Thanks, kid," Hopper shouts from another room.

"What?" Mike shouts back, frowning.

Hopper pokes his head out from his room, "She's begging me to install air conditioning and I don't need more ammunition for her –"

"Well, why don't you? She's clearly suffering, and summer's only just begun," he responds, frowning even more.

"Because it's expensive –"

“Please, Hop?” you beg.

Hopper sighs, “Fine. I’ll look into it.”

“Thank you,” you say weakly, trying to not melt into a puddle.

“My house has air conditioning,” Mike says thoughtfully, “Until your period is done, do you want to stay over with me?”

“No,” Hopper says, walking out into the living room, “No no no –“

“Why not?” you ask weakly, “I’ve stayed there before.”

“Be... cause...”

You and Mike glare at him together.

Hopper sighs, “You’ll behave?”

You nod.

“Okay. Fine. I guess it is miserable here. The birds are melting.”

Both birds are napping in the corner, a big bowl of cold water next to them.

“Can you call my mom? She can come pick us all up,” Mike asks.

“Yeah, sure kid.”

Hopper starts coughing roughly, doubling over.

“Hop?” you ask, “You’re still –“

“Yeah, kid, don’t worry about it,” Hopper mutters, wiping off something black onto his pants. It streaks all over the jeans like oil or coal.

“Hop...” Mike whispers.

“Look, kid, don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal,” Hopper snaps, “Jane, can you pack up some clothes and things?”

You nod. You get up and manage to pack anything that looks like it'll keep you cool into a bag, Mike helping you and packing up things for the birds as well.

Eventually your mom pulls up and you all file into the car, the birds in their carrying cage as their bigger cage is put into the trunk.

"Alright, Mike, do you want to drive back?" Ms. Levinson asks.

"No, I think I'd rather keep Jane company," he responds.

"Alright. Hopper, we'll return your daughter when you actually have a proper living space for her."

"Hardy har. You know, she survived *just fine* the past two years."

"Because my body wasn't trying to kill me," you mutter.

He sighs and nods, waving as you all drive off together to Mike's house.

"Hi Jane, it's good to see you," Bubbe says, running up and hugging you.

"Thanks," you murmur, cringing a little.

"Nancy's at a orientation thing down in Bloomington so you can sleep in her bed," Mike's Mom says.

"Thank you," you whisper, "Is that okay?"

"Of course. And we've turned it down nice and cold for you."

"Thank you," you murmur, immediately going into the room and lying down on the bed. Mike crawls in with you, holding you around the waist.

"Thank you," you murmur again.

"Of course," he whispers, "How are you feeling?"

"Okay... I don't like being in this room."

"I know," he mutters, "You don't have to stay here..."

"Where else would I?"

"Yeah. Also, this is my bedroom. And it's looking like it will be until we graduate," Mike sighs.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't think my mom can afford to put Nancy – and eventually me – through college *and* move."

"Oh..."

"It's okay though! I love living with Zayde and Bubbe. We get all the best food. And I'm still close to everyone, and..."

"You have to stay in the room where you tried to kill yourself for three more years."

He sighs, his breath tickling your neck, "Yeah..."

"I'm sorry, Mike."

"I'm sorry too."

"I'll get used to it, I guess..."

"I'll help you any way I can," Mike whispers.

"Thanks," you mumble back, "Right now I just hurt and feel uncomfortable."

"Do you want some chocolate?"

"Yes please."

Mike leans over and digs into his bag, pulling out a chocolate bar for you. You eat it eagerly, letting the sweet taste and comforting texture sooth you.

"Thank you," you mumble.

“Do you want me to go check on the birds?”

“Yes please.”

He gets up, planting a small kiss on your forehead, before leaving the room. You lie on your back instead of your side, looking up at the ceiling and sighing.

Don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it don't –

“Chester and Eddie are settling in well. Bubbe's talking to them in Yiddish and they love it,” Mike says, walking over and lying back down next to you on his side.

“Yay,” you whisper quietly.

“How are you doing?”

“Terribly.”

“Yeah.”

You both sit in silence for a while.

“I'm cold,” you mumble.

“Oh no... do you want me to turn the ac to a warmer temperature?”

“No, not really.”

“Okay...”

“I'm cold up here,” you gesture to your chest, since you're only wearing a tank top, “My... down there is fine.”

“Gotcha. Hold on.”

You sit up a little to watch as Mike grabs something from a drawer in his dresser and brings it over. It's one of his sweaters.

“It's going to be a little big for you because I'm a skinny giant –“

You giggle a little and put on the sweater. It's warm and soft and the sleeves go past your hands and the bottom goes over your knees.

"Thank you," you whisper.

"Of course," he murmurs in response, pulling you into another hug and kissing you on the forehead. You smile and rest your head on his chest, just letting your body relax.

"How are you doing after yesterday? In your head? Lucas told me Mrs. Byers dropped a *lot* of info on you."

"I'm... okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah... it was a lot but I'll get used to it."

"Okay."

"When... did you learn about all of this?"

"Uh... I learned what you learned when I was like, eleven."

"Oh. Is that when you normally learn it?"

"Normally, yeah."

"What else is there to learn?"

"Uh... I think Mrs. Byers is going to talk to you about all that when you get past this and get used to it all."

"Oh."

"I learned that stuff when I was thirteen, though."

"So I'm really behind."

"Kinda, yeah. But that's okay, because you've had a weird life."

You laugh weakly.

"Is this why people make fun of me a lot? Because I don't know this stuff?"

Mike sighs.

"Yeah."

"Why... didn't you tell me any of it?"

"Because I don't think I'm the right person to. Wasn't it nicer to hear it all from Mrs. Byers?"

"Yeah... yeah I guess so."

"I would have felt awkward and uncomfortable and stuff."

"Yeah," you agree, "I understand."

"I'm sorry I didn't, though. I didn't mean to lie, also I tried to avoid it..."

"Thank you, Mike," you murmur, leaning in and kissing him. He kisses you back very very softly and gently, making your heart flutter.

"Mike?" you whisper.

"Uh... yeah?"

"Do you... want us to have kids someday?"

His eyes widen in shock.

"Wh-what?"

"Do you want us to have kids?"

"I haven't... really thought about it. It's not in the future wishes book or anything..."

"But do you?"

"Uh... I really don't know..."

“Okay.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t know either.”

He’s blushing completely bright red, and you are too, as you look at each other in silence.

Don’t don’t don’t don’t don’t don’t don’t –

“I think... it might be nice?” he whispers after a while, “But... we’re really, really young. I don’t think we have to worry about that for a while.”

“Me neither,” you agree, “But yeah. Might be nice. So long as...”

“So long as what?”

“They don’t... end up like me. Like... like *us*.”

“Oh Jane...”

“I don’t want to turn someone else into a monster, too.”

“Jane, you’re not a monster.”

“I am. And now I’ve turned you into one.”

“You don’t know that. I could just be weird.”

“I turned you into a monster –“

“Jane, stop.”

You look at him with tears spilling out of your eyes and down your cheeks.

“Take a deep breath.”

You do so.

“Keep doing that,” he urges, his eyes not leaving yours. You keep

breathing, in and out and in and out and in and out, until your thoughts stop spinning round and round and round your head.

“You doing better?”

You nod.

“Good,” he whispers, kissing your forehead again.

“I’m... really tired.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Can I shower and go to sleep?”

“Absolutely, Jane,” he responds, smiling, “I’ll go to bed too.”

You smile back at him and kiss him, before showering and putting back on the sweater with shorts, because, honesty, it’s ridiculously comfortable.

You lie down on the bed and try to relax, even though your body aches and you’re tired and uncomfortable and you have thoughts you wish you could erase completely.

“Mike?” you whisper when he walks into the room.

“Yeah?” he asks softly.

“Can you stay here with me?”

“O-okay... if you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.”

He nods and lies next to you again, holding you as you face each other, falling asleep to the sound of each other’s soft, slowing breathing.

You’re glad you have Mike, while everything around you is spinning.

Even though you’re turning him into a monster, too.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hated writing this chapter so much.

I don't want to talk about this. I don't want to describe this happening to people who I think of as children. I don't want to write!!! about giving Jane the talk!!! and I have to do it TWICE. THERE'S A SECOND TALK COMING. AND ITS EVEN MORE AWKWARD. fuCK me. fuuuuck

But it's unavoidable. Unavoidable, dammit. It's important to the plot.

I hate everything.

Sorry not as much stuff about Mike's development in this chapter, we're putting a pause on that while Jane has to actually deal with her past & the fact that she's growing up and we all get to be in pain together! as a group! o-o

Anyways I hope the cute part at the end was at least enjoyable thank you all for the wonderful comments for yesterday's chapter I'm enjoying all the excitement around the new plot developments and please comment on this cringe tastic chapter of pain please make it worth it please comment and complain about how painful it was with me thank you <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

25. Let's Do The Time Warp Again

Notes for the Chapter:

Content warning for depictions of vomiting, discussions of lgbtq + phobia, brief racism, and short references to the shoah, as well as the awkwardness that is teenage sexuality.

JULY 5 1986

MIKE LEVINSON

"Listen up you little shits, you all better shut the fuck up back there or I'm turning this damn car around."

"BUT DUSTIN'S STORY ENDED TERRIBLY AND I DEMAND AN ALTERNATE ENDING," Lucas shrieks.

"Oh! My God!" Dustin roars, "If you want the story to end your way then *write your own!*"

"Maybe I *will!*"

"Maybe you *should!*"

"THAT'S IT, I'm going to TURN THE CAR AROUND –"

"Please don't," Will begs, "I want to go to the fair."

"Okay, but you're not going to get your spray paint back."

"How am I supposed to work out my emotions regarding our country if I don't have my spray paint?"

"BY NOT COMMITTING A MISDEMEANOR, WILLIAM –"

"We're going to a Fourth of July fair! It's perfect!"

Steve just groans, focusing on the road and driving forward.

"Sure, I'll take them to the fair, yeah, I know you usually do but you

can't 'cause you're still in Bloomington and Jonathan is too so he can't even help, yeah it's no problem, I love those little shits, yeah don't worry about it I have that day off anyway, yup, yup it's *fine*, you said, fuck you past Steve, fuck you with a cactus –“

“Steve there are *children* in the car,” Dustin speaks up.

“You be *quiet* –“

“Look, all I'm saying – and it is *all* I'm saying – is that Anakin would *never* have abandoned Emine. Not the way you wrote them,” Lucas interjects.

“I built up to this for *twenty chapters*. Twenty of them!”

“Well you built it up badly!”

“YOU write it then!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

“*Fine!*”

“This is it. This is how I die,” Steve grumbles.

“I mean, you could just force everyone out of the car,” you joke, grinning from your seat.

“Don't fucking tempt me, kid.”

“But we're almost there!” Jane protests.

You look over at Jane and smile at her, and she smiles back, leaning in to kiss you on the cheek.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh, fine,” she whispers.

You're having a lot of trouble believing her.

And it's making you sick to your stomach.

Or the visions are?

One of the two.

You feel sick a lot.

Steve pulls up into a parking lot and parks, looking back at the group and glaring.

"Look, Max isn't here, which means that y'all have one less snarky voice of reason. So, just... *please. Please* be chill."

"Sure, Steve."

"We'll try, Steve."

"Yes, Steve!"

Steve groans and everyone runs out of the car into the carnival grounds like maniacs, you grabbing Jane's hand and leading her over to booths with food and other things.

"What do you want to do first?"

"Can we go on some rides?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Are you sure, though?"

"Yes, Mike," she says, sticking her tongue out at you, "I *have* levitated before, you know."

"Good point."

You walk over to a station and buy some tickets, before going over to a Ferris Wheel. Jane takes your hand happily and you both enter one of the gondolas together. You wrap your arm around her shoulder, and she nestles on your chest, closing her eyes.

The wheel starts to move and she gasps in surprise, before grinning at you as it rotates around.

“I can see everything,” she whispers breathlessly, looking around at the carnival below.

“Yeah, it’s pretty neat,” you respond, smiling a little at her. She smiles back widely at you, lighting up her entire face.

You lean and kiss her, softly and cautiously.

You know that there’s a time bomb ticking.

That there’s something she’s hiding.

But you’re not ready to set off the bomb yet.

She kisses you back slightly more enthusiastically, wrapping her arms around your neck. You squeak in surprise, making her giggle.

“What?”

“You squeaked again.”

“I squeak sometimes!”

You’re at the top of the wheel, looking down around you at the whole of Hawkins. She looks around you, eagerly scanning the whole place with her eyes, before turning back to you.

“Hawkins is so small.”

“Yup, that’s what a small town is, generally,” you joke.

Jane rolls here eyes, before looking back down and frowning.

“What’s up, Jane?”

She shakes her head, her shoulders slumping.

“Jane?”

She looks back at you with tears in her eyes.

“Jane?”

“I liked Chicago a lot, you know,” she murmurs, resting her head on your chest again, “It was big. And sparkly. And all the buildings were so... tall. And all the people so... different. I felt like I belonged there, even if it was just a little.”

“Okay...”

“Hawkins I stand out. I dress differently. I act differently. I know different things. I *am* different.”

“I feel that way sometimes, too.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m Jewish.”

“Yeah...”

“There aren’t a lot of Jewish people here. We only have one synagogue, and even *that’s* lucky. When I walk through the streets people know that I’m different, you know?”

She nods, “Yeah, that’s how I feel.”

“And... we’ve been through something. Something serious. We fought off an apocalypse together.”

She watches you as you try to find the rest of your words.

“I just... people may not be able to *know* that, by looking at me, like they do the Jewishness. But... *I* know. I know I stand out. I know I’m different. I know I can’t relate to them all.”

She nods.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s how I feel. I feel so... out of place.”

“Exactly.”

You both sit there.

Words that you had thought but didn't know how to say float in the back of your brain.

"Jane?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

She smiles at you, "I love you, too."

You swallow, "Do you ever get the feeling you're... *extra* different?"

"What do you mean?"

You sigh.

"Don't... don't tell anyone this."

"Okay."

"You know I like girls."

She looks down at herself and gasps, "What? No way."

You stick your tongue out at her and she returns the gesture, the two of you smiling at each other eagerly.

"I just... I dunno."

"Come on, Mike. You can tell me anything. You *should* tell me anything."

You frown.

"You're right... I'm just... I'm just nervous..."

She leans over and kisses you softly, looking up into your eyes with her big round ones, and for a moment you think everything would be okay, even though to admit this would be to admit so much about yourself that you've tried to keep hidden for so so so so so long –

"Mike, I promise. It's okay."

You take a deep breath.

“Okay. I guess... that year I didn’t see you... I just think... I think I realized something that is part of the reason I’ve... had trouble dealing with everything. A reason I can’t... even... I’ve had trouble... admitting... to even... myself...”

“Oh?”

“I think... I like both girls *and* boys...”

“Oh – wait – are you gay?”

“No, that would mean I just like boys.”

She frowns, “What are you then?”

“Bisexual? That’s the word for it...”

“Why would that make you feel worse about yourself?”

“Can I just say how much I love you again –“

“*Mikeee!*”

“Other people think it’s weird. People hate people for it, just like how people hate gay people. And... I don’t want people to hate me.”

“Well,” she says, frowning, “We are married.”

“Yes, yes we are.”

“I think, since we’re married, unless you *want* people to know, you shouldn’t have to tell them, right? Not unless you want to.”

“True...”

“Because you’re with me, so people assume you’re... what’s the term for not gay or bisexual?”

“Straight.”

“Right. So people assume you’re straight.”

“That bothers me too, though.”

“Hmm.”

She looks lost in thought, staring out in front of her as the Ferris Wheel starts to rotate down.

“Well, then case by case basis, then? Knowing that it sucks sometimes to have people think you’re something you’re not, but that doesn’t change *who you are*, and you shouldn’t let it... affect you...”

“That’s easier said than done,” you mumble, looking out in front of yourself, “Having people... only like me because of something that I’m not...”

“Yeah,” Jane murmurs, “Well, *I love you for who you are*.”

You pull her in for a deep kiss, holding tightly to her face. She squeaks, which makes you burst into laughter against her lips, the two of you giggling at each other as the wheel slows back down to the ground.

“Thank you, Jane,” you murmur.

“Of course, Mike,” she whispers, taking your hand and pulling you along through the carnival.

“I’m not ready to tell the others yet –“

“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

You both squeeze each other’s hands, before walking up to another ride, heading onto it – a spinning teacup-esque ride that makes Jane so queasy that you spend most of the rest of the day just riding on a relaxing boat in a cheesy tunnel of love.

“This is as ridiculous as you are,” Jane giggles, color returning to her cheeks.

“Oh come on –“

“You are helpless!”

“*Helpless?*”

“That’s what Lucas called it once – helplessly in love with me –“

“Oh come *on!*”

“Look at these cheesy hearts and random swans and tell me this is *not* mirroring how ridiculous you are –“

“I like to think that I’m less ‘ridiculous’ and more ‘so freaking glad you’re here with me –“

Jane blushes and leans up to kiss you on the cheek, before sticking her tongue out at you.

“Too cheesy!”

“A *respectable* amount of cheesy!”

The boat reaches the other end of the tunnel and you both climb out, running into Dustin and Lucas watching the end of the tunnel.

“We knew it,” Lucas says, grinning.

“‘Where would Mike and Jane be,’ we thought,” Dustin laughs.

“Let’s try that awful tunnel of love!” Lucas finishes.

You rush forward and shove Lucas playfully and he shoves back, the two of you fighting lightly as Dustin cheers you on.

“Yo! Dickwads!”

You all turn around to see Steve and Will walking up to you.

“Let’s start wrapping it up –“

“Oh come *on*,” Dustin whines.

“We’ll go around a little bit more but after that we’re going *home*.”

“Fiiiiine.”

You walk as a group past some fried food, the smell so heavenly it fills every part of you.

“Steve, can I have a pretzel?”

“Can I have a corn dog?”

“I’d like some popcorn!”

“I want to try cotton candy please –“

“I deeply need funnel cake –“

“You little shits I’m buying you nothing –“

“*Please?*”

“*Please!*”

“Please, Steve!”

“Steve c’mon!”

“You hurt me, Steve. You wound me to my core –“

“Fine!” Steve shouts, “Fine.” He walks up, grumbling, buys all the food, and throws it all at you.

You happily eat your popcorn while Jane eats her cotton candy next to you, continuing to go around from booth to booth.

“Wait – woah –“ Lucas suddenly shouts, and before you all know what is happening he runs up to a booth with a bunch of bagpipes and Scottish kilts.

“Yes!” he gasps, reaching out for one of the bagpipes, “Dude –“

“Those... sure are kilts,” you say, smirking a little bit.

“This is awesome – I’m Scottish, you know, and –“

“But you’re black,” Dustin asks, frowning.

Lucas turns slowly and glares at him.

“You did *not* just say that –“

“But –“

“You can be Scottish and Black!”

“I mean, I guess –“

“Ethnicity is not the same thing as race you *complete* idiot –“

“Sorry sorry sorry!”

“I am so done with you right now –“

“Look, I’m sorry, I’m an idiot, I fucked up –“

“You know what I’m going to do?”

“Please don’t kill me. We survived an apocalypse.”

“I am going to buy some of these bagpipes and literally annoy you to death with them.”

“Kid, they’re like four hundred dollars,” Steve says seriously from behind you all, “You don’t have that kind of money.”

“No, but my mom gave me an emergency credit card,” Lucas says immediately, walking up and taking a box with a set in it without another thought, “And this is going to be my first irresponsible teenage use of it.”

“I did not witness this –“

“My last name is *Sinclair*, asshole –“

“I DIDN’T THINK, OKAY?”

“I did not know this was *happening*...”

“IT HAS A FUCKING TARTAN!”

“I am SORRY, I am *sorry*, I am *sorry* –“

“If your mom asks I didn’t *know* and you didn’t *tell* me...”

“I WORE A KILT TO MY COUSIN’S WEDDING *LAST YEAR!*”

“Okay I’m a dumbass and you get to hit me!”

“I was not complicit, do you chucklefucks understand? I was *not complicit* in this!”

Will and you are both roaring with laughter as Jane holds her face in her hands, shaking with the force of her giggling. Lucas buys the bagpipes and proceeds to go to the curb, unboxing the pipes and pulling them out. He looks awkward holding it, being as young as he is, but he manages to hold the instrument. Dustin watches with wide eyes as Lucas walks up to him, looks him straight in the eyes, and blows as hard as he can in Dustin’s ear.

SCREEEEEEEECH!

“Okay! Okay! Okay! I’m sorry! I’ve learned my lesson!”

“Never fuck with a member of Clan Sinclair.”

“Yes! That is the lesson I have learned!”

“Your mom is going to *kill* me.”

Lucas looks at Steve seriously, “Kill you for what?”

Steve looks at him with raised eyebrows.

“For –“

“You didn’t see anything. You were witness to nothing,” Lucas continues, boxing up the bagpipes, “And this lovely instrument will remain hidden in my room as I practice in secret.”

He spits into his hand and holds it out for Steve.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“You have to spit, or else one of us could go back on our word.”

Steve grimaces, spits into his hand, and shakes Lucas’.

“There,” Lucas nods, “You’re safe.”

Steve just rolls his eyes and keeps walking past the Scottish booth, grumbling in pure annoyance.

You wish you could live in this moment forever.

J U L Y 2 2 1 9 8 6

“Mike, please take a deep breath,” Jane whispers, looking at you in worry. You lean over the edge of the toilet, holding your arms around your stomach and groaning.

“So... this is the first one where...” Dustin says, his voice trailing off into the air.

“Where I experienced something not happening to me, yeah,” you croak out weakly.

“Okay, go over it again,” Lucas demands.

You’re too busy leaning over the toilet and vomiting.

You feel like all the energy is draining from your body.

“I... remembered... something... from my grandparents,” you gasp out.

Thoughts spinning spinning spinning spinning

No no –

“Oh no,” Will whispers.

“Don’t tell me...” Jane breathes.

“I... saw. I saw. A camp...” you can’t even get the words out, “A *camp*...”

You just vomit again.

People screaming.

Smoke going up from chimneys.

Others being sorted in lines.

Soldiers beating and throwing others around.

You watching your Bubbe, so much younger, being separated from her mother –

You vomit another time.

“This is bad. This is bad. This is bad bad bad bad – “

“Lucas shut up,” Jane snaps.

“He can’t control them! This isn’t like your powers, Jane, he can’t physically stop visions from happening, and he keeps getting sicker when they do –“

“And they’re happening more frequently,” Will whispers, “Mike, you gotta tell someone.”

“But – but –“

You can’t stop seeing everything you saw.

It swims in your head.

And since you weren’t you, you walked around.

You walked around the camp just, screaming, though no one knew you were there.

Screaming in horror.

You vomit again.

“Okay, I can’t keep listening to – urp –“ Dustin covers his mouth and suddenly runs away; you can hear him vomiting in the other room. In response, the birds start screaming at the tops of their little birdie lungs.

“Dustin?” Lucas shouts in shock, “Dustin, man –“

He runs away to go after Dustin, and you just rest your head against the rim of the toilet, breathing slowly to try and regain yourself.

“Why did it have to be that,” you whisper.

“I don’t know,” Jane mumbles.

“I... why. Why. Why...”

“I’m so sorry, Mike. I’m so sorry.”

You just keep resting your head.

“Uh, guys?”

“What, Lucas?” Jane shouts next to you.

“We have another problem.”

Will gets up and runs over, leaving you and Jane alone.

You feel so sick.

So confused.

So lost.

And for once, it’s not because of the monsters in your brain.

“Oh shit,” Will swears.

Jane looks at you worriedly and you heave yourself up, trying to walk over to the others. Jane holds you up, the two of you limping into the other room.

On the floor there is a large, black, goopy stain.

“Oh no,” you whisper.

“It’s – it’s fine – this is fine –“

“NONE OF THIS IS FINE!” Lucas screams, “We have to tell someone!”

The birds continue to scream with Lucas.

Will is sitting in the corner, holding his head in his hands, curled up into a ball around himself.

“Not again not again not again not again –“

“This is getting ridiculous! Mike is *developing psionic powers* –“ Lucas begins.

“Possibly,” you mutter.

“Oh my God, do *not split hairs with me right now*,” Lucas shrieks.

You shrug, looking away, still being held up somehow by the much shorter Jane.

“Dustin is coughing and now *vomiting up black gunk that looks like pollution* –“

“Don’t forget the nightmares,” Will whispers.

“Right, and having *creepy nightmares*, and then Jane is on the verge of a breakdown –“

“I am *not*,” Jane protests, looking at everyone angrily.

Lucas gives her a look.

Jane continues to glare.

Lucas continues to look.

Jane continues to glare.

"And Will is freaking out because of course this is reminding him AND me, frankly, of **ALL THE FUCKING SHIT WE'VE HAD TO DEAL WITH**," Lucas finishes, ignoring Jane's glare.

"Right, so things look bad," you agree, "Really bad."

"Really bad," Lucas repeats, "Can we please just *fucking tell an ADULT ALREADY?!*"

"Consider: what could the adults even *do*?" you ask.

"Oh, my God, you did *not* just say that," Lucas groans.

"I mean it! What do they know that we don't?" you demand.

"I... don't know," Lucas grumbles, "But not telling them is a *terrible idea*. Remember when we tried to hide Jane on our own? **REMEMBER DART?**"

Dustin takes his hat off and holds it to his chest. Lucas swipes it out of his hand.

"Do *not* morn the monster."

"He was *my* monster."

"Okay but we need a plan," you interject, "Lucas, what would you even *say* to them?"

"*Everything that is happening!*"

You shake your head.

"No."

"Please stop torturing me –"

"We can't tell them. Not yet. Not when we don't know what's going on, or what we can even do to stop it. Because you know full well that they'll fuck it up."

"Fuck it *up*?"

“Oh my God, think about it,” you roar, “Just think about it! Think about the adults. Think about how they’ve... they locked people up, they write off our problems as PTSD when it’s an actual monster or overreacting when it’s actual mental illness... they sell us out for what *they* think is right and then refuse to consider they might be wrong... they just... no. No. We’re not telling them. Not until we know more.”

Lucas glares at you for a minute, before leaving in a huff, slamming the door.

“Uh... I... should...” Dustin grimaces, “I should clean this up and then go after him –“

“I’ll go,” Will murmurs, getting up and running half-heartedly out of the cabin.

“I’ll help, Dustin,” Jane mutters, getting down to help him try to clean up the goo.

You can’t really look at it without wanting to vomit again, so you go and lie down on Jane’s bed until you fall asleep.

AUGUST 2 1986

You stare at the bathtub in your house, taking deep breaths and thinking.

The flashes are happening all the time, now.

You’re constantly going all over the place – your past, your potential future, other people’s pasts, other potential futures –

It’s making you sick, and weak, and exhausted, and constant constant nosebleeds.

You need to control this.

Not controlling it is making it worse.

And...

You're scared.

You're scared about Jane.

You have to see...

You run back out of the bathroom and into the living room.

"Bu... Bubbe?"

"Yes zeisele?" she calls back from the couch, where she's knitting quietly.

"Um... do you have bingo today?"

"Yes I do, zeisele, do you need something?" she frowns, "I was going to leave in a minute –"

"No, I was just wondering if Jane could still come over anyway."

"Oh, well I don't see a problem with it. You're good kids."

You flush a little bit without meaning to.

"Thanks, I just know it's iffy when no one's around –"

"Well I trust you both. And, frankly, I like you being alone *less*," Bubbe says, giving you a look.

"Sorry Bubbe," you mumble.

She opens up her arms and you rush into them to hug her, trying to not cry.

"It's alright, Mikey, it's alright," she murmurs, "It's not your fault. Ikh hob dikh lib."

"Ikh hob dikh lib," you whisper back. You call Jane over, and then spend the time waiting reading your comic book.

The door knocks and you run to get it, opening it up and hugging Jane tightly.

“What’s wrong?” she asks worriedly, giving you a look.

“Oh, Mike is just doesn’t want to be home alone, that’s all,” Bubbe says, “I’m about to head out.”

“Oh,” Jane frowns, “I thought –“

“To be fair, I didn’t say anything was wrong,” you mumble.

“True,” Jane agrees, kissing you on the cheek. She goes up and hugs Bubbe happily.

“Good to see you dear,” she pauses, “How are you doing today?”

Jane shrugs, looking down at her feet.

“Well, just keep your chin up. Survivors, the two of us, right?” Bubbe asks.

Jane looks up at Bubbe and nods, scrunching her face into a determined frown.

“Survivors.”

“That’s right,” Bubbe smiles, “Now I’m off. You two be good. There’s leftover food in the fridge if you get hungry.”

“Thank you Bubbe!” you call, as she waves, grabs her purse, and leaves the house.

Jane turns to you, frowning.

“So what is actually happening?”

“Oh, uh...” you sigh, “I wanted to try something and I wanted you to be here with me.”

“Okay...”

“Alright, how much do you remember about you starting to learn to use your powers?”

“Not... a lot.”

“Okay...”

“I remember... being confused. And not... really knowing what was going on around me,” she whispers, “Please don’t make me think about this.”

“I’m s – I mean – I’ll stop.”

“Thank you.”

“Well I was thinking... maybe I just need to like... use my powers more, deliberately? And then I’ll be sick less. Like... letting out the air from a balloon that’s been filled too much.”

Jane frowns.

“I’m not sure...”

“Do you ever feel like you’ve bottled up your powers too much?”

“Not... really,” she shakes her head, “No...”

“Well, okay. Do you think I shouldn’t try?”

“I think you should try, because I don’t think what’s happening to you is the same thing that happened to me.”

“Fair enough,” you pause, “I’ll go change into my swim trunks and then we’ll try the bath thing.”

“We don’t have salt...”

“No, but I feel like floating in the tub will be good enough if I have the blindfold and we bring out the radio.”

“Alright.”

You run to get changed while Jane waits in the other room, trying to not feel too awkward about it – after all, you’ve all gone swimming together before.

“I filled it up with neutral water,” Jane says, frowning, “I still think the saltwater is better...”

"It's *better*, but you don't even need water all the time, do you?"

"No, but I do if I'm really weak with my powers..."

"Well I'm not right now."

"Mike, you're weak all the time –"

"I haven't had a flash for a few days!"

"Mike, boyfriends don't lie."

You sigh.

"Today. I haven't had a flash today."

Jane rolls her eyes before frowning, "Fine. But I'm not sure about this."

You kiss her gently on the lips, "It'll be okay."

She watches you worriedly as you get into the tub and wrap a blindfold around your eyes. You float, just letting the water wash over you, feeling weightless as she turns on the white noise.

"So where are you going?" she asks.

"I don't know. Do you have an idea?"

"A memory?"

"No, I want to go somewhere for someone else."

"Okay..."

"I... don't think I really want to say when I'm going."

"Alright. That's fine."

"Thank you, Jane."

"Of course."

She's respecting your privacy.

Too bad you can't do the same for her.

But...

You have to know.

You enter the void.

The water splashes beneath your feet.

Everything feels empty.

Too empty.

Dark and scary and cold.

You hate this.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I am..."

"Okay, good. Now, just focus, like we've practiced."

You nod, and you walk through the void, concentrating.

Nineteen seventies.

The Lab.

Nineteen seventies.

The Lab.

Nineteen seventies...

The Lab...

You land.

You're in a large, white building.

Men and women move quickly around you.

You wheel around on your heels, breathing heavily.

Don't talk to anyone.

Don't talk to anyone.

Don't –

“Who are you?”

You jump.

No one has ever seen you in these before –

“Uh...”

“How'd you get in here?” the man shouts, walking up to you.

Jane's Papa.

“I'm here to see Jane,” you say, firmly, glaring at him.

He glares at you.

“We have a Code Orange.”

You panic, running away as alarms start blaring around you.

Guards start running up to you –

You scream –

You wake up back in the bathtub, panting and gasping as you shimmy out of the water.

“MIKE?” Jane screams, reaching for you and grabbing you.

“What – what just happened –“ you gasp out.

“You disappeared –“

“I *what?*”

“For like, two seconds, but you were gone!”

“I.. I...” you look at her with wide eyes.

“Where did you *go?*”

“The Lab. When we were little.”

She looks at you with equally wide eyes, “*Why?*”

“I just... I wanted to see what you and the others were like when you were getting used to your powers. I wanted to see if I was... being like you.”

Jane frowns.

“Oh.”

“But... your... the Bad Man...”

“Papa?”

“Him. He saw me.”

“He *saw you?*”

“It was like I was there...”

The two of you stare at each other, speechless, for a long time.

“Did you *travel in time?*” she finally whispers.

“I think so,” you whisper back, “I’m not entirely sure of when I went so I couldn’t ask you to try and remember...”

“No,” she shakes her head, “I can’t.”

You swallow, getting up out of the tub quickly and drying off, shaking from head to foot.

“I... feel awful...”

“Get dressed and lie down.”

“Right...”

But you put the blindfold back on instead.

“Mike *WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*”

“I need to see that I can still just visit rather than travel...”

“Mike *don't* –“

You focus, even though you're weak, just on the day before. Just on a little bit of past.

Just on sitting in the grass with Jane and feeling her hand in yours.

You're there again.

But you're you.

There aren't two of you.

You jump back, gasping for breath and taking off the blindfold. You wipe away blood covering your upper lip, dripping down from both your nostrils.

“Mike,” Jane sobs.

“Did I disappear?” you gasp out.

“No, but –“

“Good,” and then you rush back over to the toilet to vomit.

“Mike,” Jane continues to cry, and you finish and turn back to her, grimacing.

“I’m sorry, I just –“

“DON’T DO THAT AGAIN!”

“Okay,” you whisper.

She runs over to you and helps you up, leading you back over to your room.

“Mike, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” you whisper, though you feel like you’re going to pass out.

“Just rest,” she begs.

“But I’m in –“

“Here,” she mutters, grabbing your sweatshirt and helping you into it. You look at her sadly, and she looks sadly back at you.

“I’m... I apologize,” you mumble, “I won’t do something like that again.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, kissing you on the nose. You smile weakly and open up your arms, helping her crawl up next to you, the two of you wrapping your arms around each other.

“I love you,” you whisper.

“I love you. I’m so scared.”

“I’m scared too.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

She kisses you, and it’s so immediate and rough on your lips that you’re taken by surprise, before you kiss her back, slowly and hesitantly.

“Jane –“

“Shush.”

You squeak in surprise as she keeps kissing you like that, like you were the ocean and she was desperate to drown. Your heart starts beating much too rapidly, you feel sweaty, and your churning stomach churns with extra intensity.

“Jane,” you whisper again, pulling away from her and looking at her with wide eyes.

“What?”

“Just... what are you doing?”

“Kissing you,” she whispers, looking at you sadly.

“Why... are you kissing me... like... this?”

“Because I almost lost you once,” she says barely above a whisper, “I almost lost you once, and I’m not... holding... it in.”

“Holding... what in?”

“How I feel about you.”

You gulp almost instinctually.

She kisses you again, slower this time, making your heart somehow beat faster.

You’re aware of how close you both are.

How you’re alone.

How she’s acting reckless.

How everything feels like you’re on the edge of a cliff, about to jump down.

But differently than usual.

More like Dustin being trapped by the bullies, than you being trapped by yourself.

It still scares you.

“Jane...”

“Sorry,” she whispers, looking suddenly embarrassed.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m just... really not feeling well. So this is overwhelming,” you admit.

She nods, curling up next to you again. You kiss the top of her head, and hold her as close to you as you can.

“I love you,” you murmur.

“I love you,” she whispers back, looking up at you for another minute, “Please... please be careful.”

“I will.”

She looks at you skeptically.

“I *promise*.”

She sighs, and nods again.

“I just want us to be safe. And Okay.”

“Me too, Jane,” you mumble, “Me too.”

And you wish you could believe that it would be okay.

Notes for the Chapter:

You know, sometimes I regret directly quoting things from tumblr, but that post isn't one of those things. It fit perfectly in my opinion.

Yaaay awkwardness. Delicious, delicious
awkwardness /sarcasm.

Me: It's uncomfortable to write [mike and jane's growing sexuality]

My fiance: it's uncomfortable to read

Me: yaaaay

My fiance: yaaaaay

why must this be unavoidable in this work for their character development. Why must it be. Sigh.

Also, if you're wondering "why the fuck would he flashback to the HOLOCAUST," have you heard of: the fact that the PTSD survivors of the holocaust suffer is _so strong_ that oftentimes their CHILDREN will have holocaust related PTSD? Seems natural that the grandchild of holocaust survivors would have his first major time-jump to be to that event, given its imprint in his family.

To everyone mad that I made Mike bisexual: did you. not read. his emotions. about will. in the season two chapters. and how they were. nearly identical. to his emotions. about jane. it's almost like. you can have. more than one crush. at any given point.

To everyone mad that I made Dustin say a stupid racist thing: we all say stupid racist shit sometimes, he got duly punished, we can all move on. Hooray!

Anyways, please comment :) your comments are seriously some of the best shit I've ever read, and I love talking with you all about this story so much!!!! I eagerly look forward to all of your reactions and excitement :) :) :)

Also, friendly reminder to join us on the Discord (a chatting client) where you can talk to me, the author, about the story, stranger things in general, and delicious memes. Also, birds. Because birds.
<https://discord.gg/gSGvPrR>

Please comment! And join us! Thank you all :)

26. It Never Belonged To You

Notes for the Chapter:

Huge as fuck content warning for references to childhood sexual abuse. I don't describe anything in detail but it is stated rather than alluded to that it happened.

Also some brief discussions of healthy teenage sexuality but honestly that's the least of this chapter's problems and it doesn't go into detail

Just, shit. Shit shit shit. Shit. Shit shit. Shit. Prepare yourself, reader.

AUGUST 11 1986

JANE HOPPER

“Back from the farthest West, it is the wonderful, the beautiful, the badass –“

“Please, *please* stop –“

“Maaaax Mayfield!”

“Yes, I’m home, Lucas, you can stop being so weird about it,” Max says, sticking her tongue out at him, but she smiles too. She looks happy and bright, which is different than when she left, though that is probably mostly because she’s back with all of you.

“So,” she says, whirling on her hips, “Dustin.”

“Yes’m?”

“With all do respect, what the fuck?”

“Oh no, not you too –“

“Anakin *loves* Emine. Loves her! Why would he leave her?”

"I built to this for *twenty*. *Chapters. TWENTY CHAPTERS, MAXINE.*"

"Well you didn't build up to it enough!"

"See, I *told* you Max would agree with me," Lucas shouts triumphantly.

"I thought you built up to it well, Dustin," you murmur, smiling at him.

"Thank you Jane," Dustin wraps his arm around your shoulder, "It's good to know who your *true* friends are."

You stick your tongue out at Max and she glares at you playfully.

"Do you wanna fuckin' go, psychic girl?"

"Don't think I *don't*!"

"Kids," Hopper groans nearby, "Registration starts soon. Can we just. Can we just go into the gymnasium."

You walk up to him and smile, giving him a hug. He pats you on the head.

"Sorry Hop," you say, walking forward to the school. Mike quickly runs after you to take your hand, looking at you lovingly. It makes you blush.

It always makes you blush. And nervous. And your heart pound. And everything tingle.

You enter the line behind a bunch of other kids, with your friends right behind you. The line weaves around from the table with stacks of papers – your school schedules – to tables with books and books and more books.

"By the way, Mike, congrats on becoming a sophomore," Max says.

"Thanks," Mike sighs, "It was tough but I did it. I passed history."

"And your other classes," Dustin reminds.

“Those were all fine, especially since I basically had to learn it all for the second semesters of those things. No, the pain in the ass was history, and I’m glad Miss Ford doesn’t teach US History so there’s no chance of me being in a class with her.”

“A miracle if ever there was one,” Hopper grumbles, “I want to give that woman a piece of my mind.”

“Like you gave that guidance counselor?” Dustin grins.

“I don’t care that I’m technically banned from being within five feet of him, that’s not how you counsel a kid –“

Everyone giggles as Hopper continues to grumble. You reach the front of the line, hopping on your feet happily.

It’s nice to think about things that make sense.

School, classes, learning, books.

All of that makes sense.

More than everything else.

“Hopper, Jane,” you say.

“Yes, yes,” the teacher mutters, pulling out a sheet of paper, “Here you go.”

You eagerly grab it and read from it, “First – US History, Second – Gym and Sophomore Health, Third – Sophomore Lit, Fourth - Lunch, Fifth – Study Hall, Sixth – Honors Algebra II, Seventh – Spanish II, Eight – Chemistry.”

“I’m so proud of you, kiddo,” Hopper says, wrapping his arms around you and hugging tightly.

“Hop!”

“You’re still in honors math. Heck, you’re still in honors math grade ahead of where you need to be. That’s so amazing.”

You flush with pride and beam at him as Mike grabs his schedule, running over to compare it with yours.

“We’re in Gym, Study Hall, Spanish, and Chem together!” he gasps, “That’s most of the day!”

“Don’t forget lunch,” you remind, beaming.

“This is going to be *awesome*,” he says, grinning back, “Just sucks I’m in history during third and literature during first.”

“And Geometry instead of Algebra II. I can help if you want –“

“I’ll be fine,” he says, sticking his tongue out at you, “Math isn’t that bad for me.”

You kiss him on the cheek, smiling at him as Dustin runs up to you both.

“Guys, we’re all in the same Spanish Class!” he cheers eagerly.

You frown, “That’s it?”

He sighs, “Yeah, seems like it.”

“But our math study group!”

“We still have the same teacher,” he points out, “We can study together even if we’re not in the same class.”

“Oh *good*,” you breathe with relief, “We have different Chemistry teachers though.”

“Yeah, that sucks,” Dustin grumbles.

“Alright!” Lucas runs up with his schedule, “Whadda we got?”

He holds it up to the rest of yours, frowning.

“Aww man, Dustin, you’re not in chem with us!”

“Oh come *on!*” Dustin groans.

“But hey! We can still have our math study group!” Lucas comforts, “And let’s see... yeah that seems to be all I have with anyone. Poop.”

“Agreed on that sentiment,” Mike says, frowning.

“Hi guys! What do you all have?” Will says eagerly, running up to the rest of us, “Oh! We’re all in the same Chem!”

“Not me,” Dustin grumbles.

“You’ll survive,” Mike teases.

“Doubtful –“

“Aww, did none of you ask for AP US History?” Will asks, frowning.

“You *did*?” you ask in surprise.

“Yeah, of course! It’s the first AP class we can take and I’m good at history!”

“Okay, well it should be obvious why *I’m* not in that class,” Mike says, shaking his head.

“Why didn’t you sign up, Jane?” Hopper asks seriously.

“Uh... I didn’t want to take an AP class yet. This is only my second year of school,” you answer.

He doesn’t need to know you were hoping to be in Mike’s class again.

“Alright,” Hopper sighs, “But next year don’t skip out on a more challenging class, alright? You want to go to a good college.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“That’s my girl.”

Max finally comes up to you all, beaming.

“So, what does everyone have?”

Everyone compares with her one last time, and she frowns.

“Well Will, we’re going to be best buds this year.”

Will giggles, “Yeah apparently. We have almost the whole afternoon together.”

“Aww man, why don’t we get to have our science party this year?”

“I don’t know, but I’m pissed that we aren’t even in the same chemistry class,” Dustin grumbles.

“Wow we have literally no classes together,” you frown, looking at Max sadly.

“Yeah, this sucks. Ah well, we all still have lunch. And Will and I get to suffer through AP US together,” Max says, shrugging.

You all happily continue to chat, walking away from the table.

“Hey so what’s in this sophomore year health anyway?” Hopper asks one of the teachers as you start to grab your books, bringing them up to the register to pay for them all. The Algebra II and Trigonometry textbook is *heavy*, much much *much* too heavy.

“Our math study group is going to have a fun time this year,” Lucas says grimly.

“We’re going to *conquer* the world of functions and angles! I believe in us!” Dustin says eagerly.

“That’s it, I’m taking your books away from you –“

“Don’t you *dare* take away my paddles!”

You focus, and Lucas can’t grab the books out of Dustin’s hands.

“Jane, *seriously?*”

You just burst into laughter in response.

You hope this school year will be better than last year.

AUGUST 18 1986

You realize you're going to miss having Will as your study hall buddy.

It's not that you don't *like* spending time with Mike. Of course you love to spend time with him.

But in study hall he's just distracting you while you try to review Spanish vocab from last year.

The fifth note of the class lands on your desk when you're just halfway through the period.

You turn to look at him, glaring. He smiles sheepishly.

You take out your notebook, write "STUDY," in big letters, and hold it up for him to see. Mike just sticks his tongue out at you.

You take out your history book from your bag and point to it. Mike groans, but takes it out and starts to read the text, focusing on it heavily while you roll your eyes and look away.

Spanish is just an awful, awful thing for you.

Another note lands on your desk before long.

You slowly turn to face Mike, pursing your lips together into a line.

He smiles at you sheepishly again.

You hold your Spanish II book up to your face and leave your nose buried in the pages, refusing to look away from it for the rest of the class.

When the bell finally rings, you give Mike an annoyed glare, and he grins at you.

"Oh, come on, Jane, it's just the first day –"

"Shush! You should have been studying history!"

"I did a little!"

You groan quietly and flick him in the arm, before kissing him on the

cheek.

“I’ve got to go to math. See you in Spanish.”

“See you,” he smiles, before walking off in the opposite direction. You just roll your eyes and go to math class.

“Hey, Hopper.”

You let out a long, pained sigh.

“Yes?”

The girls walk up to you, all grinning.

“So, what’s Wheeler like?”

“Levinson,” you mutter, “His last name is Levinson.”

“Whatever,” the lead girl, Tracy, waves her hand, “What’s he like? Nerd must be grateful.”

“He’s a nice person. I don’t know why you’re bothering me about this,” you glare.

“No, no, what’s that *suicidal nerd* like, you know, *in bed*.”

You frown.

“What are you even *talking* about? He sleeps in *a bed*...”

All three girls start cackling.

“You crack me up, Hopper. How much of a punk can you even *be* when you know literally two things about life?”

“I know more about life than you,” you mutter angrily.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what do I mean by what’s he like *in bed*?”

"I don't know."

"What's a blow job?"

"I don't know."

"What's *third base*?"

"I don't *know*!"

"Do you even know what sex is?"

You feel all your thoughts stop at once.

Everything in you feels like ice.

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"Yes, I do."

"Well, at least *that's* an improvement from last year!"

All the girls giggle together.

"I am going to be late for class," you mutter through gritted teeth.

"Yeah? And what are you going to do about that?" Tracy's friend, Ren, asks.

You glare at them all, "Get out of my way, *now*."

"Oh like you can make us," Tracy says, rolling her eyes.

You think for a moment.

You know what Hop would say.

So you push Tracy with your arms while you move her with your

mind.

She flies backwards in the hall, screaming, as multiple students fall down with her.

The other two girls scream and run out of the way as you step over Tracy and keep walking down the hall, your head held high with your chin in the air as you make it to Math class.

“How’s it going, Lucas?” you grumble, slamming your books on your desk.

“Uh... better than it is for you?” he responds, frowning.

“Tracy, Ren, and Penny cornered me in the hallway and asked me a bunch of stupid questions again,” you mutter, “So I used my powers.”

Lucas groans.

“Now? *Seriously?*”

“I needed to get to class.”

“Settle down, everyone, settle down –”

You shut up and pay attention, quickly writing down things as fast as you can in your notebook, ignoring the looks Lucas keeps sending your way.

You’re not in the mood for it anyway.

S E P T E M B E R 3 1 9 8 6

“Mrs. Byers?” you ask in confusion as you get home from school, dropping your bag off at the front door and walking over to greet the birds in the cage, “What are you doing here?”

She and Hopper look at each other for a minute before she turns back to you.

“I wanted to talk to you about some things. You’re a sophomore now, and well... as you remember, there was more to that talk we had

over the summer than what I said that day.”

You groan, letting your shoulders slump.

“Do we *have* to?”

"I think you do," Hopper says gruffly.

You glare at him.

“Why can’t *you* tell me?”

“Because I think it would be better coming from another girl,” Hopper responds, “Look kid, I know this is rough, but Lucas told me that the girls were still teasing you at school, and you have health class coming up... I just don’t want to leave this any longer, do you understand?”

You frown at him, tears in your eyes, “But...”

“What’s wrong, Jane? Why is this so rough for you to talk about?” Mrs. Byers asks softly.

“I...”

You take a deep breath.

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“I don’t know.”

“If you really want it to be Hopper who tells you –“

“No,” you take a deep breath, “This is fine. This is... This is fine.”

Hopper nods and gives you a tight hug, before heading out the door.

“I’ll go watch Will –”

“Thanks, Jim.”

You've never heard her call Hopper Jim before. You know it's his first name, but you've never really heard it.

You sit down across from Mrs. Byers, frowning.

"What else is there to talk about?"

She lets out a long sigh.

"So... it's more complicated than what I said."

"Okay..."

"What we talked about last time – that was the bare bones. What happens to your body, what happens to make a baby, that kind of thing. Basic, basic anatomy and biology."

"Right."

"Well... there's more to it than that. There's also attraction, and how people feel about one other, and what happens when you date someone."

"I already know what happens when you date someone..." you mutter.

Mrs. Byers sighs.

"Well, yes, but there's more to it than what you and Mike have done. I *hope*."

You frown.

"Let me start from the beginning," Mrs. Byers pauses, running her hands through her hair, "Sex isn't only about making babies."

"Alright..."

"Frankly, Jane – can I be frank with you?"

You nod.

"It feels nice."

“Oh... why?”

“Probably to encourage us doing it. That way we reproduce more, and it helps to form bonds between people, you know? I don’t know. I’m not an evolutionary biologist,” Mrs. Byers says, shaking her head, “The point is, people don’t only have sex to make babies.”

“Okay...”

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t think about it.

Don’t think about it.

Don’t think about it –

“However, obviously, people aren’t getting pregnant all the time.”

“No...” you agree.

Your mind can’t stop spinning.

“So we have this stuff called birth control. And we use it to stop pregnancy from happening. It can be a cover over the penis, or a pill that makes you not release eggs like normal – stuff like that.”

You frown.

“Are you... supposed to have sex?”

“Not unless you don’t want to.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Yes, you’re a bit too young don’t you think?”

“I do.”

You frown more.

“What’s... it called if someone... makes you have sex with them?”

Mrs. Byers looks at you sharply.

“Has Michael –“

“No! No no, I was just... wondering... we haven’t done *anything* like that at all. We’ve only kissed.”

“Well, dear, that’s called rape... it’s a very, very, very bad thing to do to someone else. Essentially equivalent to murdering them, in my opinion.”

“Okay...”

“How’s this. Let’s go through any questions you have, because I’m sure you have them, and then I can answer them.”

You nod eagerly.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

You spend most of the evening talking – about what it means to like someone, or love them; about what dating usually means; about what one usually looks for in someone they marry; about other things people do besides sex; about what different words you’ve had thrown at you in the halls mean; about consent; about being attracted to someone; about protection; about diseases; about, well, everything, really.

Your mind is still spinning at the end of it.

“Alright, I think that’s enough,” Mrs. Byers pauses, “How are you doing with all of this?”

“Okay,” you mutter, “I... I just have one more question.”

"Of course, dear."

"You say most people are attracted to... lots of people... all the time? But they only date one person. Usually."

"Right. Sometimes you can date more than one person, though. That's okay, so long as everyone knows."

"That's... that's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what, sweetheart?"

"I... I think I've only been attracted to one person."

"Mike?"

You nod.

"Well... I mean, you did find each other very young."

"Yeah... but you talk about it like, even if you're in love with someone, you can still find other people cute and stuff... and I just..." you take a deep breath, "I *don't*."

"Oh... that's okay, Jane."

"It is?"

"Absolutely."

"I just... I feel... I feel like that makes me b-b-broken –"

"No, Jane," Mrs. Byers says firmly, "That's okay. It is. So the only person you ever think is cute like that is Mike. Who cares? Honestly, you could decide you find no one cute. I don't think it would matter."

"But – shouldn't I want to have babies –"

"No," Mrs. Byers shakes her head, "Your job is not to have babies. Your job is to live your life the way you want and to be happy."

You keep crying.

“And if that doesn’t involve having kids, or having sex at all, even, then well – it’s better for you to be happy than for you to do that.”

You throw your arms around her and hug.

“I just... I know I... I do like Mike like *that*,” you pause, “And I love him.””

“Obviously,” Mrs. Byers says, smiling at you.

You smile weakly back.

“I just... if I hadn’t found Mike...”

“You never would have even thought about it?”

You nod.

“That’s fine, dear. A little weird, but we’re all a little weird here. You included.”

You smile weakly.

“Alright, do you want some dinner? I brought over some of your favorites –“

“Cinnamon rolls?” you gasp.

All the thoughts.

Swimming.

Round and ‘round your brain.

Round and round and round and round –

“Yup! And some eggos too.”

You beam at her.

“Mrs. Byers?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask another question?”

“Of course. You can ask me any questions you’d like to ask me.

“Why won’t Hop talk to me about all this stuff?”

Mrs. Byers sighs as she preps the food.

“He... feels awkward about it. A lot of this is tied to you growing up, you know. You’re not an adult yet, but you’re looking more grown up, and you’re going to start making more grown up decisions.”

“Yeah...”

“Like, the reason all this came up was – well – first of all, it’s not right that you’re getting bullied in school for something you couldn’t possibly know, based on how you grew up and everything.”

You nod mutely.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

“Second of all, you’re going to go over a lot of this in more detail in your health class this year, and none of us want you to be caught off guard, or not know what’s being talked about.”

You nod again.

“Third of all... well sweetheart, you and Mike have been together a long time. And while we didn’t really worry about it before, you guys are getting older. When Nancy was a sophomore in high school, she

had sex for the first time –“

“Wait, she *did*?”

“Yeah. Sixteen is a common age for people’s first times.”

“Oh...”

“Not that you have to. You don’t have to do anything until you’re ready.”

“Right.”

“But we just... didn’t want you kids... getting into that sort of situation... without being talked to about safety and everything, first,” Mrs. Byers gets out, looking uncomfortable with every word.

“Are you okay, Mrs. Byers?”

“Yes, dear, I’m fine.”

“you... don’t look happy to be talking about this.”

“Well, to me and Hop, you guys are all kids. You shouldn’t even be *thinking* about this stuff. But, we know that’s not actually the case.”

You nod.

You can’t really think about it, anyway.

Not without –

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don’t.

Don't.

"Also, Hopper wanted to talk to Will tonight, so we figured it was a good night to do a switch."

"Why is he talking to Will?"

"It's almost been two years since that... *thing*... took him over. He's been having more nightmares again."

"Oh. Like Dustin and Hopper's nightmares?"

Mrs. Byers drops her knife as she cuts the rolls.

"Dustin's... been having nightmares?"

You nod.

You realize you shouldn't have told her but you couldn't stop the words before coming out.

Mrs. Byers starts pacing around the room, wringing her wrists.

"This isn't good... this... this isn't... this isn't good –"

"How bad are Hopper's nightmares?"

"Not sure. He hasn't told me."

"You don't already know?"

She frowns at you, "Why would I already know?"

"Aren't... aren't you both a couple?"

Her eyes widen larger.

"What –"

"It just seems like... you both are close... you go on dates... you touch each other a lot –"

"We don't go on dates, Jane –"

"I think you've spent the night over here a couple of times when Will's been out of town, or he's been with you when I've been over with friends –"

Mrs. Byers' eyes widen.

"I... do not have to discuss this with you. We are adults and you are a child."

You glare.

"That's stupid."

Mrs. Byers sighs, heaving her shoulders.

"I know."

"So then... why aren't you together?"

Mrs. Byers frowns.

"We were together a long time ago. In High School."

"What happened?"

"We had a fight. You know how we are. And because of that I started to go out with Will and Jonathan's dad. Hopper went off to the army, fought in a war... I married their dad and we had kids... Hopper married a woman when he came back and had a kid with her..."

"But now?"

"Now, it's been many years since then, I'm raising two boys on my own, and he lost his kid to cancer and divorced his wife and is raising a *psychic kid* on his own."

"But you're not on your own."

"Jane, what are you talking about –"

"You are helping raise me right now. You told me about all this sex stuff."

“True...”

“And he’s helping you raise Will – taking him to the doctor’s, talking about flashbacks...”

“Also... true...”

“And you love each other.”

“We don’t –“

“You look at him like Mike looks at me!” you say firmly, stomping your foot on the ground.

“I... do not...”

“Yes you do.”

“I do not, Jane, now eat your rolls –“

“You look at him like that! With lustful eyes!”

“Oh please don’t say that to me you’re a child –“

“You do though!”

“Fine, maybe I do.”

“So you should tell him!”

Mrs. Byers glares at you some more, but finally sighs.

“Fine. Maybe I will.”

You nod firmly and start eating.

Now that you’re done pestering her, though...

The thoughts have come back.

And they won’t stop.

They won’t stop.

They won't stop.

They won't...

Don't...

Don't...

Don't...

Don't... ..

S E P T E M B E R 6 1 9 8 6

You don't remember much from when you were a kid.

What you remember you've always picked and chose from.

Tried to repress.

Tried to hide away.

Ever since the monster was locked away and you had a calmer life.

So for nearly two years.

You've just.

Ignored.

Ignored ignored ignored ignored.

But now your thoughts are swimming like a black cloud has taken over them.

Turning round and round a train in your head.

When you were very very young – couldn't have been older than five – you were playing. In a room, you don't know which one. There were blocks all over the place.

Kali was there. You didn't know she was Kali. You just called her Eight.

You remember her now.

You remember her now because you also remember that one of the Bad Men would come in and make you both undress.

He'd make you both undress and then look at you and then make you put back on your clothes.

But you didn't want to.

Not in front of him.

So you forgot about Kali.

So you forgot about him.

You made yourself forget.

You sit in your room, holding your head in your hands, holding your face against your knees.

Just.

Forget.

Forget again.

Forget it all again.

Stop remembering, Jane.

Stop remembering.

Stop.

That happened to Eleven.

You're Jane now.

You're not Eleven anymore.

This didn't happen to you.

This didn't happen to you.

This didn't happen to you!

You remember when you were seven.

And some of the men taking you around to testing kept touching you.

Touching you places where you didn't want to be touched.

And you said no.

And they kept touching you.

And you didn't want to think about your own body anymore.

It wasn't your body.

It was their body.

And their mind.

To be used.

To open things.

And break things.

And find things.

And your powers were all over the place.

And you felt sick a lot.

Sick a whole lot.

But they touched you.

So you forgot.

So you forced yourself to forget.

Because you didn't want to remember anymore.

Your body wasn't yours.

Your body wasn't yours.

Your body wasn't yours.

You curl up around yourself more and start tearing at your long hair
and rocking back and forth.

You scream a little into your knees.

Mike is at synagogue and Hopper is at work so no one knows your
thoughts are spiraling down –

Down –

Down –

Down –

You aren't Eleven anymore.

You're Jane now.

You aren't Eleven anymore.

That didn't happen to you.

You're Jane.

And your mind is your own.

And your body is your own.

And that happened to Eleven.

Not to you.

And you remember when you were ten.

And how you were now used to it.

Used to your friends – eight, seven, thirteen, two, all the rest of them

– being taken away from you or escaping –
And then you were taken away from them –
Because your powers were too strong –
And you were doing things that they didn't want you to do –
And your mind wasn't yours
And your body wasn't yours
And you undressed in front of them constantly
And they poked and prodded you
And you just
Didn't feel it
Anymore
You didn't feel it anymore
Not anymore
Not anymore
Not anymore
And you were ten
And you trusted Papa because he said to trust him
He said you could trust him
He said he was taking care of you
Helping you
Helping you
Helping you

Helping you use your powers

You're too dangerous for the world

He said

You're a monster

That's what he meant

You're a monster

A dangerous monster

But he would keep you from hurting people

And it happened

And it happened

And it happened

You can't ignore it, Jane

You can't ignore it

It happened, Jane

That happened to you

You *are* Eleven

You *are* Jane

Jane is Eleven

And Eleven got raped

And you can run and run and run and run

But you can't escape it

It happened

It happened

It happened

It happened

That happened to you

You can't ignore it

You can't

Something that should be special

Instead of that

It got taken away

It got taken away so wrongly

That happened

You couldn't stop it

You couldn't control it

And you continued on

Because at that point

It was the same as everything else

And you kept using your powers

And making them grow

And they forced you to do things

And they wanted you to kill a cat

But you refused

And they locked you up

And you killed them

But you still weren't your own

You still didn't own yourself

Not your mind

Not your body

You'll never own yourself, Jane

You'll never get to take that back

Never

Never ever ever

Your body doesn't belong to you

You're trapped in a prison that you can never, ever, *ever* escape

No matter how much you scream and break

You were sent after the Russians and you spied on them

But then you saw the Monster

And Papa made you find the Monster

And you didn't want to

You never wanted to

You never wanted any of it

You can't stop shaking as you sit there and hold yourself and cry and
cry and cry and cry

You found the Monster

And that was the last straw

You couldn't hold it in

Not anymore

And you broke open the world

And you escaped

And you found Mike

And you almost undressed in front of him

But he taught you what love was

And Hopper finished teaching you

But that wasn't enough

That wasn't enough to make it all better

You were Jane but Jane could not stop being Eleven

This wasn't a fairy tale where the monster turns into a beautiful princess

You think your life is a fairy tale like Hopper tells you?

A fairy tale where your prince charming comes and saves you and keeps you safe and loved forever?

Mike is not a prince

And you are not a princess

Mike is a monster like you now

And you're a monster

You've always been a monster

You're a monster who made Mike a monster

And monsters don't get happy endings

You don't get that

You can't stop crying

You can't get yourself to stop crying

You wish someone could hold you

But you also never want to be touched

Never ever ever again

You can't stop shaking

You can't stop screaming

You can't stop crying

As memories flood around and around and around and around your
brain

Spinning spinning spinning memories

Memories tightening on a loop in your mind

Like the record player got stuck

Like you are stuck

You're stuck, Jane

You're stuck, Eleven

This happened to you

This happened to you and you will never get that back

You will never, ever

Ever

Get that back

You are Jane

But Jane is Eleven

And Eleven, when she was ten years old

Was raped

Notes for the Chapter:

That was ridiculously painful to write!

I can't actually decide which is worse - Mike's self loathing suicidal spirals or Jane's realization of "fuck I've been violated and I've been ignoring it for years" spirals.

They're both bad and hard to write and oof I'm just going to give Jane a nice warm blanket, hot cocoa, and I'm going to beat off all those icky men who sexualize her (and who sexualise the actress who plays her) with a bat. Brb.

plays whack a mole with the patriarchy

Anyways if you're wondering "wow the syntax there was weird" there's an answer for that and that answer is coming in a later chapter so anyways leave your guesses for why it sounds like an internal dialogue in the comments

Also I didn't describe Joyce talking to Jane in detail because I COULDN'T. I couldn't DO THAT. So I did us ALL A FAVOR and told rather than showed what happened. You're W E L C O M E.

Please comment my dudes, don't kill me, and yeah. Love y'all. Did you know this is the third longest fic in the Stranger Things fandom here on AO3? I'm very proud of this. Comment to make this insane word count and amount of pain worth it, my dudes. Thanks :) <3 <3 <3

27. Microbiome

Notes for the Chapter:

Discussions of medical stuff and bacteria. Lots and lots and lots of discussions of bacteria.

S E P T E M B E R 7 1 9 8 6

M I K E L E V I N S O N

“Mike? MIKE!”

You groan, sitting up, though you still feel dizzy.

Your Mom is looking at you in worry, her face pulled into a frown.

“Mike, what are you doing on the floor of the bathroom?”

“Uh... meditating?”

Your mom glares at you.

“Michael.”

“I fainted,” you admit.

“You haven’t been cutting yourself again, have you?”

“No! No no no – no – I haven’t been I promise –“

“Alright, so then why did you faint?”

“Not... not sure.”

“Michael.”

You groan and sigh.

“It would be easier to tell you if Jane were here...”

Your Mom sits next to you, frowning.

“Have you heard from her at all?” you ask quietly.

“Hop said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Ah.”

You sigh and run your foot across the tile, “I’m worried about her.”

“Me, too, but you should be more worried about *you*,” she frowns, looking at you, “Are you still getting those bloody noses?”

You nod.

“Michael... please tell me what’s going on. You promised no more secrets.”

You sigh heavily.

“Alright...”

You fidget a little bit, picking at your nails, staring down at your legs, but you know your mom is impatient, and you don’t want to wait any longer.

“Um... so... starting last summer I would get... flashbacks. To all the bad stuff that happened.”

“Okay, seems reasonable.”

“Yeah. And... then they started to get worse. I’d feel physical sick, during them. Vomit and everything. Sometimes I’d get nosebleeds.”

“Alright...”

“And they were weirdly vivid too. Not like I was remembering something, or even having a flashback, but like I was physically *there*, almost. And then, when I came back from therapy, you and Bubbe and Zayde were talking to me –“

“I remember you acting weird.”

“Yup. I... started to flash back to something... that hasn’t happened yet,” you frown, “Or never happened. Or something. But it was

something else.”

“And you had that nosebleed...”

“Yeah. So... the visions kept happening, sometimes to the past, sometimes to the future. And I kept getting sick and getting nosebleeds. So... after Will became a bar mitzvah we went to the cabin and I went into a sensory deprivation tank –“

“You *what?*”

“Well, it was the kiddie pool, but yeah...”

“So, then what happened?”

“I could travel to the future at will. And it happened like I saw. I also traveled to the future and managed to change it, a few times, and traveled to the future and it changed a little bit, so like, free will exists, I guess...”

Your mom holds her head in her hands.

“So...”

“So, then, later on, I tried to go to a specific time in the past. And according to Jane, I disappeared in the present. And I could see memories from other people.”

“So what you’re saying is you can travel in time.”

You sigh.

“Yeah.”

“And you have nosebleeds.”

“Yup.”

“Like Jane.”

“Exactly.”

“Michael, psychic powers aren’t a transmittable disease.”

“Well, no, but we don’t have a better idea. Unless you were experimented on when you were pregnant with me and never told me,” you snap.

Your mom sighs.

“Alright, we should tell Doctor Owens. Unless you already have?”

“It hasn’t come up,” you admit, “I’ve been focusing on my other problems.”

“Since it’s almost the year anniversary of... everything, I can’t really blame you,” your mom shakes her head, “Let’s go to the lab and insist on seeing him.”

“Mom –“

“You fainted, Michael, I’m assuming because you went somewhere?”

“Yeah, I can’t always control it. And I went pretty far into the past.”

“Where did you go?”

“It was weird, I was when the Department of Energy Lab was being built and everything. I didn’t mean to go there, it just kind of... happened.”

“Alright, well, let’s get going.”

Your mom helps you off the floor and you start to gather things to leave, you still feeling weak and woozy.

“Karen?”

“Yes, mom?”

“Where are you going?”

“We’re bringing Michael to Doctor Owens.”

“Why?”

Your mom sighs and looks at you.

“Can I tell them?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Go wait in the car.”

You walk outside weakly and sit in the front seat, staring out the window.

You wish you could take a very, very, very long nap.

Your mom comes back out, with Zayde and Bubbe with her, the three of them getting into the car.

“Wait – you’re all coming?”

“Yes, and I called Hopper too.”

“But –“

“Look, zeisele, we love you, and we’re not letting you go through this alone. Not anymore. You’ve been battling against monsters and evil on your own for far too long,” Bubbe says firmly.

“We’re not letting our family be torn apart by this nonsense anymore,” Zayde agrees, “What you go through we go through together.”

“I even called Nancy. She should be down in the next few days,” Mom explains as she pulls out of the driveway.

“But – she’s safe at college –“

“She and Jonathan are coming regardless from Bloomington. We’re all handling this *together* now, do you understand?”

You frown, “What about Holly?”

“She’s already at a playdate with some friends from school. She’ll be fine. If it looks like we’ll be there long I’ll call from the lab.”

You nod mutely.

“My other friends?”

“Do you want me to get in contact with them?” Mom asks seriously.

“I... I mean... they should know this is happening.”

“I’ll call them up when we get there, then, too.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course dear.”

You eventually pull up to the new lab, walking together through the halls up to the receptionist’s desk as your Mom starts shouting at the poor woman. You sit down, staring out the window, your heart pounding much, much too fast.

“Alright,” your Mom sighs, walking over to the three of you sitting in the waiting room, “It seems he’ll be able to see us soon.”

“You’re kidding,” Zayde says, frowning.

“Well, I said to tell him it had to do with The Great Nonsense and that seemed to do the trick,” Mom rolls her eyes as she says this, looking utterly furious.

“Should you call Ted?” Bubbe mutters reluctantly.

“Fuck no.”

You snort with laughter.

“I wouldn’t have mentioned it except, well, he is still his father.”

“Yeah, he’s still his father like you guys are still German,” your mom shakes her head, “No, I’m not calling him.”

Bubbe nods quietly.

You breathe with relief.

The waiting takes forever. Zayde pulls out a magazine from the side, and Bubbe starts to drum her fingers on a chair. Mom keeps calling

people from the receptionist's desk.

You can't stop worrying.

About everything.

"Michael?"

You look up to see Doctor Owens smiling at you.

"Do you want to come back?"

"Yeah."

You get up, and the others get up too, to follow you.

"Wait," Doctor Owens says, "Is this alright, Mike? Or would you rather visit with me alone?"

You shake your head, "No, I think they need to be here. And the others are coming too."

"The others?" Doctor Owens frowns, raising his eyebrows.

"Yup," Mom says firmly, "The whole... party, if you will."

Doctor Owens nods in understanding and you all enter his office, you sitting down in the chair you usually sit in and sighing.

"So, what's happening?"

Your mom starts describing everything while you stare out the window, trying to not think in too much detail about any of it.

You don't want to be told there's something wrong with you.

You can feel your worry in the pit of your stomach.

When your mom finishes explaining, Doctor Owens gets up immediately and starts pacing.

"Mike, I think we need to go to another facility in the building. Not my office."

“What – why?”

“I need to run some tests. Immediately.”

“Okay...”

“I’ll tell the receptionist to send the rest of the party down to the lab but we should head off. Don’t worry,” Doctor Owens pauses, “It’ll all be relatively painless.”

You nod.

You’re put into a wheelchair, which is utterly humiliating, and wheeled up to another floor. Your family follows you, your Mom and grandparents looking terrified as you race down the hallway and you’re taken into an examination room. Your parents are shuffled into an adjacent room while Doctor Owens stays with you.

“Alright, Michael, say ‘ahhhh’.”

You open your mouth wide and he takes a bunch of cotton swabs to the inside of your mouth, putting them in insulated tubes.

“Okay Michael, I need you to spit up.”

“Spit – what now?”

“Hack a loogie for me.”

You nod, bringing up as much gross liquid as you can and spitting into a cup he provides.

“Alright, I’m going to take some blood samples. Hold still and squeeze this ball for me, alright?”

You do so, and he sticks a syringe in your arm, which hurts, and freaks you out a little bit, because blood reminds you of bad things, so you just look away while it happens.

“Alright, now I’m going to need you to sneeze –“

“To *sneeze*?”

“Yes, into this cup –“

You groan and do so.

“Alright, last few things. We’re going to need stool and urine samples –“

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“And then we’re going to put you through an NMRI machine.”

“*What?!*”

“We need to look at your neurological activity.”

“Okay...”

You do everything he asks, and the machine is terrifying, but you get through it.

At the end of it all, you feel completely drained, sitting there in a hospital gown.

“I’m going to start running tests on all of this. I asked Jim to bring over Jane because I need to test her too,” Doctor Owens says, frowning and pacing, “You can go rest in the overnight room with your family.”

You nod, and get wheeled over to the other room by a nurse.

“Michael? That took a long time –“

“They’re running a *lot* of tests,” you admit quietly, getting up into the hospital bed, “I’m exhausted.”

Your mom starts pacing.

Bubbe looks worried.

Zayde looks furious.

“He looks like he has some idea of what’s going on,” he grumbles, “I *demand* that he come back out and tell us –“

"He doesn't want to scare us, David, not without knowing all the *facts*," Bubbe sighs.

"I don't care! Our grandson is developing psychic powers and *no one is telling us what is going on!*"

You groan quietly in the bed, holding your hands over your eyes.

"Let's just be quiet for Mike, okay?" Mom mutters.

"Fine," Zayde snaps, "Fine."

You wait in the room a while, just staring up at the ceiling, wondering –

Wondering –

Wondering –

The door to the room bursts open.

"Kid, why didn't you *tell me?!?*"

You look at Hopper in shock.

"Wha –"

"You should have told me about these visions when they *all started*, Mike! For fuck's sake, we all agreed that when all this nonsense ended the *last time!*" Hopper opens his mouth to keep ranting but he doubles over, coughing, black gunk coming up on his hands.

"Woah –"

"Hopper sit down –"

"Jim!"

"Sorry," he grunts, "Sorry. I should go back in there with Jane. She's... she doesn't want to be alone for some reason –"

"I'll go," Mom offers, leaving the room quickly. You look at Hopper nervously.

“Kid, you really should have said something.”

“What about *you*?” you shout loudly, “Huh? Look at that! Look at your hand! Why haven’t you told anyone about that?!”

Hopper glares at you and you glare back at him.

“Fine, kid. Fine. I should have been talking about this.”

“Damn right!”

“And *you* should have been talking about *your issues!*”

“FINE!”

Zayde groans loudly, holding his face in his hands.

“This is a nightmare,” Bubbe mutters.

Hopper sits down in a chair and keeps coughing, black gunk coming up from his lungs and collecting in his hands.

“Okay, if you ask me, you should also be talking to the Doc, Jim,” Zayde says gruffly.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah –“

“You need to be checked out! That isn’t *normal!*”

“No, it’s not –“

“So then *why are you arguing?*”

“BECAUSE SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH JANE –“

“SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH *YOU*, JIM –“

“Oh my God everyone SHUT UP!” you scream, “Just SHUT UP!”

Everyone turns to look at you.

Your head is pounding.

“Just. Shut up.”

Hopper washes his hands as your grandparents sit silently together.

You wish you could see Jane.

But you know how long all those experiments take.

So you sit and you hold your head in your hands and you try to not cry.

Keep it together

Keep it together

Keep it together

Keep it together

Keep it together

Keep it together

Keep...

Keep it together...

Eventually the door opens and your mom comes back in, Jane next to her.

She does look awful.

She doesn't have any makeup on, but there are dark circles under her eyes. She looks extremely tired, and when your mom puts her hand on her shoulder, she twitches a bit. She goes forward into her own hospital bed, lying down and staring at the ceiling.

“Jane?” you whisper, frowning.

She sits up and looks at you, mumbling, “Hey.”

“How are you feeling?” you ask.

She looks away, down at her knees, “Awful.”

All the adults watch you both silently.

You want to talk to her alone –

But you just don’t see that happening. Not here.

Not during this whole *mess*.

“Guys can we –“ you have to try anyway.

“Michael, we should all stick together for now,” Bubbe murmurs. She walks over to Jane and hands her a glass of water, which she takes eagerly.

Hopper coughs again.

“Hopper maybe *you* should go to another room,” Mom grunts.

“Fuck no, my daughter’s in here –“

“You are exposing *all of us* to *whatever that gunk is* – “

The door opens and you jump up, hoping it’s Doctor Owens.

But it’s just your friends.

“Alright, I picked up all these stupid chucklefucks –“ Steve snaps, looking furious. Joyce enters in behind him.

“What’s going on?” Dustin asks, running up to you. Will follows close behind, while Max sits in a chair and holds her head in her hands. Lucas just glares from the corner.

“Told you so.”

“Oh please, don’t –“

“I *told* you so! I told you all so back in *May*. *MAY!*”

“Look we all fucked up –“

“YOU all fucked up! YOU!”

“Guys this is *not helpful*,” Max mutters, “We have to figure this out –“

“Doctor Owens is working on it now. There’s nothing we can do but wait,” Mom interjects tiredly.

“This is ridiculous,” Lucas grunts, pacing the room, “It’s obvious what’s happening!”

“Lucas –“

“Somehow, Jane fucking transferred some of her powers to Mike! What else could it *be*?”

“Lots of things, kid, you all went into the tunnels last year despite it being a terrible idea,” Hopper snapping, with more coughs – which Dustin matches.

“Yeah, but I didn’t breathe in anything,” you mutter.

“And what happens to him is the same as what happens to Jane! That’s a fucking coincidence if ever there was – *unless* Jane did this!”

“She didn’t do anything, it was an accident,” you snap.

“Sorry, I know she didn’t on purpose, but –

“You cannot *transfer psychic powers* like a disease!” Hopper roars.

“Oh yeah? Since psychic powers, you know, *shouldn’t fucking exist in the first place*, care to explain *why*?” Lucas hisses.

Hopper falters, sputtering a little.

“Look, Lucas, I understand where you’re coming from, I do,” Mrs. Byers sighs, “But the fact of the matter is that to make these kids psychic in the first place, they used drugs. Psychedelics and stuff. And they did it on pregnant women so it affected the children. That’s not a contagious thing. I’ve done my share of pot and other drugs in my time and I’m sorry, I don’t get people high by being *near* them while high –“

“That’s not entirely true.”

You all turn around to see Doctor Owens enter the room, a stack of papers in his hands, looking grim.

“What, of course it is –“

“Not that last part, but the first bit. About how we made them psychic in the first place.”

He turns to Jane and look straight at her.

“And its time I told you how we did it.”

He sits down, directly in between the feet of your bed and Jane’s bed. Everyone else crowds around, listening carefully, as Doctor Owens pulls out a file from his stack of papers.

“Is everyone here?”

“Nancy and Jonathan aren’t,” Steve mutters quietly.

“Well,” Doctor Owens pauses, “I’ll want to start treatment right away, so we can tell them later I suppose.”

You look over at Jane in worry.

She’s holding herself too tightly, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

Not even yours.

You wish.

You just want.

Five minutes.

To talk to her.

To reassure her.

To remind her that no –

No, this wasn't actually her fault.

It's no one's fault.

But you're not going to get that.

You're too late.

"Now," Doctor Owens continues, ignoring your thought spiral, "What I'm about to tell you is top-secret information."

"You're kidding," Steve says dully.

Doctor Owens gives him a look before continuing.

"Much of what MKUltra has worked on has been top secret, it's true. Most of these research won't be available to non-governmental research facilities – universities, privately owned labs, the like – for many more decades. And one of these research projects is what we've deemed, and will one day leak the research of so that it looks like it came about from typical research institutions, along with the name – anyways, we've deemed it the Microbiome."

"The micro... what?" Hopper asks, glaring.

Dustin starts coughing quietly, retreating to another corner of the room to do so.

"The microbiome," Doctor Owens repeats, "So, a biome is a group of plants and animals that have common characteristics for their environment. A grassland is a kind of biome, or a forest. That sort of thing."

"Okay... what does that have to do with –"

"Micro, meaning small, indicates that microbiome is the small biome. Essentially, it is the biome of the self."

"Wait wait wait," Dustin says, walking back over, "Wait. A person can't have a biome. We're just... one organism."

"Ah, but we are not."

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me with all of this –“

“This isn’t some conspiracy, Jim,” Doctor Owens snaps back, “For every human cell in our bodies, there’s a cell of a microorganism as well.”

“Wait – *what?*”

“About half the cells in our body are bacteria and other living things. Mostly in our digestive tracts, but also other places as well.”

“Wait... we’re half not human?” Will whispers, his eyes wide.

“We are indeed half not human. We each have our own suite of microorganisms inside of us that make us who we are. They affect how we eat, how we move, what makes us sick, and may even impact our personalities as well,” Dr. Owens takes a deep breath, “Everyone’s microbiome is unique. And, in fact, when you take antibiotics, you kill much of your microbiome, which is why you’re more susceptible to infection.”

“This is all top secret?”

“The government is going to roll out this research – i.e., plant researchers to get it going in public institutions – in about ten to twenty years.”

“Jesus,” Hopper swears, pacing the room with his hands in his hair.

“Now, this is normal for everything. All plants and animals and anything that is a multicellular organism has a microbiome. So it’s not so much that we are only half human as it is that to be human is to have half of your cells be bacterial –“

“Get on with it, Doc.”

“Just one more thing. Our microbiomes are affected by most everything. What we eat, where we sleep, what water we drink, and who we interact with. In fact, a single kiss transfers over nearly a hundred million bacteria from one mouth to another, and in the reverse direction as well,” Doctor Owens continues.

Your eyes widen.

You look over at Jane.

She isn't looking at anyone at all.

"Now, usually people don't notice, at all. You become a little more like your partner and vice versa. It's part of the natural exchange of life."

You need to talk to Jane.

You need to talk to Jane *right now*

You need to talk to Jane RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW AND NO ONE WAS LETTING YOU TALK TO HER –

"Now, back to MKUltra. Back when the project was at its height, we were doing experiments on college-aged men and women from free countries around the globe. We were testing the responses of their minds to specific combinations of drugs," Dr. Owens continues, flipping through his sheets, "But, these changes were always temporary."

"Temporary? But –"

"Temporary. The drugs did very little permanent alteration to the brain's function. They were just chemicals being transported up; they couldn't actually give someone permanent psionic powers. Drugs were always needed to create the desired reaction."

Dr. Owens sighs, rubbing his temples.

"So, Dr. Brenner and his cronies decided to do some genetic engineering."

"You've got to be kidding me right now –"

"May I remind you, Jim, that the government has decades worth of biological research that it's keeping hidden? It's part of the effort against the Communists. I don't agree with it any more than you do,

but those are the times we've been living in. The government walks a narrow tightrope between keeping discoveries secret, and rolling out ones so we don't seem to be behind in terms of scientific progress."

"Fine, Doc. Fine. Keep going."

"They created viruses and bacteria that would infect the mothers of the kids, affect their microbiome, and create transcripts that would travel up to the brain. See, the brain has a barrier and actually doesn't have a microbiome to itself at all. But proteins and other molecules can be transferred up there. So most of the microbiome for this is in the digestive tract, and it manipulates processes in the body to be transferred up to the brain. These bacteria and viruses – depending on the desired function, much more complicated than I need to go into, just know the actual functionality of the body was altered – were injected mostly in the reproductive system of the mothers, not so that they would infect the mothers, but so that they would be incorporated into the developing zygote. When a mother gives birth, yes, she gives her genome, and the genome of the father. But she also gives her environment in the womb – her mitochondria, her other organelles, and her microbiome."

"She *gives* her *microbiome*?" your Mom asks quietly.

"Yes. The womb is not a sterile environment, and blood is routinely passed from mother to developing child."

"This is all a load of gibberish to me, doc, but whatever," Jim mutters, "So you infected the mothers with bacteria and she gave that stuff to the kids and they became psychic."

"Precisely."

"Did you – did you do anything else, or?"

"We took the children as infants and ensured that the bacteria colonized the desired parts of the body – given our injection times, they usually did. Some of the kids we then gave back to the mothers, others we didn't, depending on the fragility of the bacterial colonization."

“Okay...”

“We either then raised the children, or we stole them at about five years of age. They were all brought here.”

“How many were there?” your Mom whispers.

“Fifteen.”

“*Fifteen?*” everyone shouts, except Jane, who’s just crouched in on herself still.

“Fifteen.”

“Okay,” Hopper groans, “Okay. So this is how they got the ability to do this shit in general. What caused the specific powers? And how could – Mike –“

“The types of bacteria and viruses we used for the infections. Jane was given things to manipulate time and space, *broadly speaking.*”

“Fantastic,” Hopper groans.

“So... then...”

“So, as she and Mike started up a romantic relationship, she started slowly transferring her microbiome to him. Through kissing,” Dr. Owens sighs heavily, “Seemingly, she’s transferred the bacteria that would have allowed her to manipulate time in addition to space.”

Your mind is spinning.

“Would – would she give him more?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because at some point the bacterial replacement of Mike’s microbiome is complete, and the mixing even. Frankly, it’s weird that it wasn’t an uneven distribution of abilities and skills, but I believe based on our initial testing that Mike *did* receive some space-specific

bacteria, he just can't use them without the others. And Jane still *does* have some time-specific bacteria, but without the ones she transferred to him..."

"So what happens to Mike now?"

"His body accommodates the new bacteria and learns to host them."

"Will it?"

"They almost always did. Only test subject – sorry – child number one didn't. She died in infancy."

"So Michael should be fine?"

"Absolutely fine. If he rejected the bacteria, he would already be dead – usually about a year after infection, so last year – or he wouldn't have the abilities anymore."

"So he's a psychic now."

"Precisely."

"How long will this time of... figuring it out last?"

"Not sure. How long have you been feeling sick, Michael?" Doctor Owens asks you seriously.

"Um... a while. Honestly for almost a year."

"Then it shouldn't be long now. Jane here was done with the nausea and vomiting stages of all of this much sooner than that."

"What about the fainting?"

"Oh that's constant, if he tries to use his powers too much."

"Thing is," you mutter quietly, "I can't always control it?"

"That only comes with practice," Doctor Owens admits, "It's one of the many reasons we kept the children in isolation for most of their childhoods. And I'm sure Jane still slips up from time to time."

You and Hopper exchange a look.

“So what do we do now?” Mom asks tiredly.

“We wait for Mike to get better,” Doctor Owens sighs, “We wait, and we monitor. I’m going to treat his symptoms a little just to ease the transition. He’s not in any danger, though his immune system is weakened by all of this and he’s susceptible to more diseases than your average person.”

“What about Jane? Why did you run all those tests on *her*?” Hopper demands.

“To see if her microbiome was altered. It was.”

“Is there *any chance* of either of their biomes being further messed up by this?”

“Probably not. We administered... an unusually high bacterial load of this into Jane because of her mother’s extreme susceptibility.”

“ENGLISH, SAM.”

“Essentially, we ‘gave’,” Doctor Owens puts air quotes around the word, “More powers to Jane because her mom could do more than most of the other test subjects. While any test subject – child – might transfer their powers, Jane was essentially a guarantee. She had too high of a number and they were competing with each other to the point of some of Jane’s bacteria colonizing other places in the body that we weren’t really aiming for. Such as the mouth microbiome.”

“Okay,” Hopper groans, running his hands through his hair, “Okay...”

“I’m going to start administering drugs and other substances to Mike. We should also monitor Jane – make sure that she hasn’t been affected by all of this...”

Jane nods, but her face looks utterly lost.

YOU

NEED

TO

TALK

TO

HER

“Michael, do you have any questions?”

“An infinite number,” you admit quietly.

“Well, you can ask some now –“

“How come I can use the void if my powers are time based?”

“Because the void seems to be the mind space that all the psionics use. It’s potentially just another dimension of the mind or universe that humans could, theoretically, tap into, but they don’t. Not without help.”

“Okay. How come I can travel in space as well as time?”

“That I would need us to go over your powers more, but it might have to do with the imperfect transference of powers between you and Jane.”

“How come Jane’s powers haven’t gotten weaker at all?”

“My guess is because the powers she really has an easier time using and accessing are those that wouldn’t have been transferred in the first place due to their microbiomic location. So if she’s tapped into these powers at all, it was very weak and preliminary.”

“Okay...” you sigh, “Okay. Are you guys going to like... experiment on me now?”

“Well, since Brenner hasn’t been heard of in nearly three years and I’m in charge, no. Not unless you’re okay with it. And everything would require your mother’s *and* your consent,” Doctor Owens explains.

“Alright... yeah. I understand. Thanks.”

“I think this has been a stressful enough afternoon for you and we should all let you and Jane rest –“

“Can we stay here?” Will asks nervously.

“We have some other waiting rooms and things if you *insist* –“

“Yes, we do,” your mom says angrily.

“Alright. Mike, I recommend you get some sleep.”

“We’ll all be right here, bud.”

“You’re over the hump, you heard him!”

“It’ll be fine.”

You nod, looking at everyone. The other kids start talking and walk out to explore the building, much to Doctor Owens’ chagrin, who immediately rushes to chase after them. Your Mom, Bubbe, and Zayde walk up to you, smiling at you weakly.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“Alright,” you mutter, “Um... Bubbe?”

“Yes zeisele?”

“One time... when I had a flashback...”

“You shouldn’t be talking now, Mikey, you should rest –“

“No, I want to get this off my chest,” you take a deep breath, biting your lip a little bit, “One time when I went back to the past, I... I saw you.”

“You saw – “

Bubbe’s eyes widen.

“Michael...”

You reach out to hug her and she holds you tightly, the two of you crying as she rubs your back and whispers soothingly.

Zayde swears loudly, and you can see over Bubbe's shoulder your mom pulling at her own hair, pacing back and forth in the room.

"That – Doctor – he better have some damn ideas so you can control *when* you go to –"

"Karen, maybe we should just... just give him time to rest before we start going into all that," Zayde mutters.

"Yes," Bubbe agrees, "Yes."

She turns back to you.

"Do you want to talk more about what you saw?"

"It was basically everything I've learned in school and heard you talk about," you whisper, "I'm not sure... how much we need to go over it."

"Did anyone see you?"

"It was one of the times when I was just... projecting? Maybe that's the word I should use. This was instead of physically *being* there. So... no. No one saw me."

She sighs, "Well, that's good at least. Hopefully, you won't ever see anything like that again."

"Yeah," you mutter quietly, "Hopefully."

"Dad, Mom, can one of you go to the Hopper's cabin and take care of their birds?" Mom asks seriously, "I don't know how long we'll be here and –"

"I'll go," Zayde offers, "Retirement wasn't *that* long ago."

"Thanks Dad."

"Okay, fine, your job as a pet store owner *is* coming in handy –"

Bubbe snorts.

Zayde kisses Bubbe on the cheek.

“I’ll just spend the nights there, make sure their cage is clean and they’re fed, and then come back in the day.”

“Sounds good, Dad.”

He leaves, and you lie back in the bed, feeling exhausted.

“Just sleep, sweetheart,” your mom murmurs, “Just sleep.”

You look over at Jane, and see that she’s already asleep, lying down in her bed with her eyes closed.

You sigh.

Guess you’ll talk tomorrow.

You close your eyes and let your exhaustion wash over you.

S E P T E M B E R 8 1 9 8 6

You wake up, groggily, to everyone being by your bed, looking scared and talking in hushed voices.

“What’s going on?” you ask immediately, tiredly sitting up and looking at your friends and family – Nancy and Jonathan have finally arrived, too.

Everyone looks at each other.

Your mom turns to you.

“Mike...”

“What? What is it?”

“Mike...” she takes a deep breath, wringing her wrists anxiously, before opening her mouth again to speak.

“There’s something wrong with Jane.”

Notes for the Chapter:

DO YOU REALIZE HOW EXCITED I WAS TO COME UP WITH THIS IDEA

anyways I apologize for the... oversimplification of a lot of these concepts. Or, alternatively: I'm sorry for including such complicated concepts.

Basically if you thought this was too simple to the point of being wrong (it was) or that this was too difficult to the point of being not-understandable (I did my best) I'm sorry. If you understood it and you also understood why I cut some corners, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

This is why biologists shouldn't write fiction, probably, but here we are.

Also, no, I don't think that the government knew about the microbiome in the 80s (or CRISPR and other genetic engineering tools that would have been needed for like half of this, for that matter). But I figured it was plausible enough for a conspiracy-based show like Stranger Things.

Who's ready for shit to hit the fan the next chapter and keep hitting the fan? I'm ready. I'm totally ready for the fan-hitting shit.

Please comment my lovely lovely readers, thank you all for your support of this story <3 <3 <3 You're all amazing people and I love talking to you in the comments ^_^

28. No Escape

Notes for the Chapter:

Content warning for illusions to childhood sexual abuse & self-loathing thoughts

SEPTEMBER 8 1986

JANE HOPPER

You are a monster.

A monster.

A monster.

A monster.

A lovely little monster whose body and mind aren't yours.

Monster monster monster monster monster monster monster

On repeat you remember

On repeat

Spiraling down

Constant images

You can't move

You can't talk

You can't

You can't

You can't

You can't

You can't

You can't

You can't

Can't

Can't

Can't

Can't escape

Can't escape

Can't escape

Can't escape

"What's wrong with her?" Mike shouts, getting up rapidly from his bed.

You see him.

You see what's happening.

You hear what's happening.

But you also see the past.

You also remember.

Remember.

Remember.

Remember.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

“She hasn’t moved or talked since last night,” Hopper says, pacing in front of you.

“What?!”

“We have tried everything –“

“Does she respond to – is she alive –“

“She’s alive.”

“Did she do something to herself? Did she –“

“No, she seems to have just woken up and been unable to move.”

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Can’t escape the spiral

And now every single

Every single

Even

Even the good

Even the kisses

Even the good moments

Even the good memories with Mike

Those are ruined too

You've never

Never

Been in control

Of your body

Not as a child

And not now

You were violated

And now you violate others

Whether you want to or not

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

"What have you done to wake her up?" Mike screams, getting up and hitting Hopper.

"Doctor Owens is running tests now –"

"I don't give a SHIT about your tests! Wake her up! Wake her up NOW!"

"Kid, we've been *trying* –"

"You should have let me talk to her yesterday! You should have let

me say something – she was clearly – she was breaking down –“

“You had to rest!”

“He still has to!”

“LET ME TALK TO HER –“

“Kid, you need to calm down –“

“Doctor Owens is going to figure it out!”

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Mike is pacing the room

You wish you could talk
But you're trapped in your head
It's like your memories
Are choking you
Choking you
Trapping you
In a box
In a prison
Your mind is a prison
Your body is a prison
Life is a prison
But you can't escape
You can never escape
Because you own nothing
Certainly not yourself
Trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped

"Mike you need to calm down and *sit down* –"

"NO! NO! SHE IS IN TROUBLE! SHE IS IN TROUBLE! I'll be FINE, I'll GET THROUGH THIS, you HEARD HIM YESTERDAY, you have to LET ME HELP –"

"How can you *possibly help*?"

"I DON'T KNOW BUT THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING –"

"Mike, there isn't always something you can do."

Trapped.

Trapped.

Memories.

Memories.

Awful.

Awful.

Awful.

Awful.

AWFUL.

STOP.

No

STOP

No

STOP

No

STOP

no

STOP STOP STOP STOP

It's like your mind is being twisted up

A black thing is enveloping it

Snaking around it

Filling you up everywhere

You want to cry

But you can't get tears out

You can't move

You can't do anything

You're trapped

Trapped trapped trapped

Trapped in your head

You can't escape

You can't move from it

You can only remember

Remember being watched

Remember being touched

Remember *that*

Remember

Remember

Remember

Trapped

Trapped

Trapped

"Mike you need to lie down, right now –"

"Like fuck I do!"

"Look, Doctor Owens is on his way back –"

“Screw this! Screw *all of you!*”

You can hear Dustin coughing.

You can hear Hopper coughing.

Cough

Cough

Cough

Cough

You’re not coughing

But you made everyone sick

You made everyone sick

You opened the Gate

And now everyone was dying

Dying dying dying dying

You’re a monster

You’re a monster who made another monster

Who made your Mike another monster

Who made *Mike a monster*

YOU MONSTER

Trapped

Trapped

Trapped

Can’t escape

Can't try to escape
Can't think of anything else
Can only think of memories
Can only think of your memories
And that you're a monster
Monster
Your kisses are all tainted
Each one
Each one hurt him
Each one made this worse
Each one turned him into a monster
All ruined
All ruined now
All ruined
You hurt him
They hurt you
And you hurt him
You're no better than they are
No better
No better
No better at all
You're just as bad

Evil

Twisted

Monster

“Jane?”

You can see him

He's in front of you

Kneeling next to you

“Jane, it's Mike. It's me. It's Mike,” he murmurs.

He's looking into your eyes.

His beautiful eyes meeting yours.

You hurt him.

You hurt him.

You hurt him.

“It's me. I know you're hurting in there.”

Trapped.

Just want to think about –

Anything else –

Jane stop –

Jane stop –

Jane stop –

Jane stop –

You can't stop

You can't escape

Dark clouds

Like snakes

Wrapping around your head

Squeezing you

Torturing you

You HAVE to think about this

You HAVE to, Jane

You don't have a choice

You have to remember

You're a monster

You're a monster

You're a monster

You're a monster

You're no better than the Mind Flayer

You and the Mind Flayer are the same, really

Just the same

All the same

Monster

Hurting and killing your family

Hurting and violating Mike

You hurt Mike

You hurt him like you were hurt

Bad

Bad

Bad

Bad

Bad

You're the bad one now

Not papa

YOU

“Jane, please. Talk to us. Please.”

You can't

You can't talk

You can't get words out

You can only scream

Scream and scream and scream and scream and scream inside your head

Trapped forever

Awful

Awful

Awful

Awful

Awful

“We really need to talk to you, Jane. We need to know what’s going wrong, okay?” Mike asks.

“She’s not going to answer,” Will whispers, “I just... I know it.”

“Will, please –“

“This is it, Mom. This is everything going to shit for the last time. I know it. I know it. I know it –“

“Okay, Will isn’t helping.”

“I’ll take him out,” you hear Jonathan say.

You wish you could speak.

You wish you could answer.

You wish you could tell them.

You wish.

You wish for a lot of things.

You wish you could talk to Kali.

You wish you could talk to Hopper.

You wish you could talk to Mike.

You want to talk to Mike.

You want to tell him you’re sorry.

You have a wound, Eleven.

A terrible wound.

And it’s festered.

And it’s grown.

It’s a rot.

That's spread all over you.

Every corner of you.

You can't escape it.

It's spread.

And now.

Now it will kill you.

Now it's killing you.

You're trapped.

Trapped in yourself.

Trapped.

Forever.

In this nightmare.

You were violated.

And then you violated the best person.

The best person in the universe.

The one who saved you.

How could you?

How could you have done that to him?

Oh Jane

How could you do that to him?

You're not Jane

You're a monster

You're just Eleven

You had your fun little game for two years and now it's back to reality

"Jane? Jane, it's Nancy."

You see her.

She's kneeling next to you.

She's smiling a little.

"Hey, I came all the way back from southern Indiana. I wanted to see you. Can you talk to me?"

You can't say anything.

You're trapped in the spiral.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No escape for you.

No escape for anyone.

No escape.

Black tendrils creeping around every cell in your body

And choking them

Choke choke choke choke choke

Trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped

"So, I've hurt a lot too. About a lot of things," Nancy murmurs,

talking quietly, “There have been times when I’ve felt so guilty about Barb that I just... shut down. There were days, that year. My junior year. When I just didn’t leave the house. Mom never noticed because my grades didn’t slip, but... it’s hard, Jane. It’s hard to admit when you have a problem. It’s one of the hardest things. But when you do, I promise, it gets so much easier. People will be there, to help you. We’re all your family, Jane. We’re all here for you.”

You want to respond.

But you can’t.

You’re trapped in your memories.

They keep cycling ‘round and ‘round and ‘round and ‘round.

Down an infinite loop in your mind

And there’s a voice telling you –

They’re lying, Eleven

They’re lying to make you feel better

But no one likes you

Because you’re a monster

- and no matter what you do you can’t make the voice go away

Or the dark monster go away

You can’t

You try

But you can’t

You cannot escape

Not from the memories

Not from yourself

Not from your internal prison
Your body isn't yours
Your body was never yours
Your mind isn't yours
Your mind was never yours
You are a monster
Designed
Perfected
And implemented
You were just supposed to fight the bad guys of this country
That's all you were built for
But then you got loose
And
Like monsters do
In every movie, book, and show
You wreaked havoc
And you thought you were doing right
Because you are the monster
So of course
You think your perspective is right
But you are the monster, Jane
Eleven

Eleven is the monster

And Jane

Being Eleven

Is the monster too

“Alright, this is what we’re going to do,” Hopper says firmly, looking around the room, “We’re going to wait for Doctor Owens to get back. We’re going to do what he says –“

“Bullshit!” Mike shouts.

“Mike, maybe we should at least *listen* to what Doctor Owens has to say –“

“This is all bullshit! The biggest fucking bullshit!”

“Michael –“

“Just leave me alone! You should have let me talk to her alone *hours* ago!”

“Fine, you want to talk to her alone, kid? Then fucking talk to her alone! I get it! I get it! I’m an awful father and I should never let anyone into my life whatsoever because I’m a black hole that wrecks everything! I fucking get it, kid! I fucking made a mistake!”

“THE MISTAKE YOU MADE WAS NOT TELLING ME YOU WERE HIDING HER –“

“YOU’RE STILL ON ABOUT THAT? IT’S BEEN *TWO YEARS* –“

“YES I’M STILL ON ABOUT THAT! YOU FUCKED UP! YOU FUCKED UP ME, AND NOW LOOK, YOU’RE RIGHT, YOU FUCKED HER UP TOO!”

“A YEAR TOGETHER WOULDN’T HAVE FIXED THAT –“

“IT WOULD HAVE GIVEN HER MORE TIME TO SOCIALIZE AND THEN MAYBE PREPARE HER FOR WHATEVER IS FREAKING HER

OUT RIGHT NOW –“

“FINE, KID, FINE, I FUCKED UP, I FUCKED UP –“

“YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME SHE WAS OKAY! YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME! AND NOW SHE’S FREAKING OUT!”

“NO, KID, YOU KNOW WHAT? THAT WAS ME FUCKING DOING THE RIGHT THING.”

“FUCK YOU.”

“I HAD TO ATONE FOR MY MISTAKE.”

Everything goes quiet.

You’re still trapped.

But everyone’s gone quiet except the war raging in your head.

And the memories spinning down

Memories spinning down

Spinning down

Down

Down

Down

Down...

“What... mistake?”

“Fuck, kid, is this really the time?”

“Yes, Michael, you’re sick –“

“I don’t fucking care. I’m not sick like *she* is.”

“Zeisele –“

You watch as Mike pushes everyone out of the way and stands in front of Hopper in his hospital gown, arms tightly locked in front of his chest.

Bubbe and Zayde are sitting in chairs, tears streaming down Zayde's face. Bubbe's face is as white as a sheet.

Mike's Mom is standing in the back corner of the room, her hands in her hair like Mike often does when he's freaking out.

Joyce is holding Will in another corner, and Will is crying.

Dustin, Lucas, and Max all have their arms around each other, watching in fear.

Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan are all holding hands.

And Hopper is just standing there

Not saying anything.

"What. Mistake."

"Now is not the time."

"What. Mistake."

"Now is not the time."

"WHAT. MISTAKE."

"NOW. IS. NOT. THE. TIME."

"IT IS THE TIME! NOW IS THE TIME! WHAT FUCKING MISTAKE DID YOU MAKE, HOPPER?"

"I FUCKED UP."

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"I FUCKED UP!"

"WHAT. DID. YOU. DO."

“I TRADED JANE FOR WILL.”

Silence.

Again.

Silence again.

“You... you *what?*”

“When. When we had to find Will in the Upside Down –“

“Jim you *didn’t* – “

“I told them where Jane was! I had to make a choice!”

Everyone backs away from Hopper as though he’s carrying a disease.

You are still trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped.

Trapped in.

Trapped in your.

Trapped in your mind.

Trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped –

“I made the wrong choice.”

No one says anything.

“I fucked up. I should have figured out another way to get Joyce and me to the Upside Down to save Will. I shouldn’t have let them go after her. I shouldn’t have. I fucked up. I was wrong.”

“Get out.”

“Kid –“

“GET OUT!”

“I FUCKED UP, AND I DID WHAT I THOUGHT I HAD TO DO TO FIX IT. I DID WHAT I THOUGHT I HAD TO DO TO FIX IT. I TOOK HER IN. I CARED FOR HER. AND I LOVE HER LIKE A DAUGHTER –“

“FUCK. YOU. FUCK YOU. FUCK YOU ALL. EVERYONE GET OUT.”

“Mike –“

“GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!”

“Mike, calm down –“

“I DON’T WANT TO SEE HIM! I DON’T WANT TO LOOK AT HIM! I WANT HIM OUT! I WANT HIM –“

“Mike, he’s Jane’s legal guardian.”

“LIKE HELL HE IS!”

“None of this matters because *Jane can’t say what she wants! SHE CAN’T TELL US HOW SHE FEELS ABOUT THIS!*” Max screams, running up to everyone, “We don’t know how Jane feels! Mike, you get to be pissed off – fuck, I’m pissed off and I wasn’t even *there* – but you *don’t know how Jane feels because NONE OF US HAVE FIGURED OUT HOW TO SNAP HER OUT OF THIS!*”

Mike huffs furiously, before going to sit back in another chair.

You wish you could process this.

You wish you could know.

You wish you could think about it.

You wish you knew that you wanted to decide how to feel.

But you can’t escape.

You can’t escape.

The memories tighten around you and you're trapped.

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

You are a monster

You are a monster

You are a monster

You are a monster

You are a monster

"I fucked up."

"Shut up."

"I fucked up, alright? I screwed up. I didn't know Jane then. I didn't know her. I just knew that the government goons would just keep chasing her for the rest of our lives, and meanwhile, Will was about to die."

"Fuck you."

"So I sold her out, and it was a mistake. How many times do I have to say it's a mistake before you know I mean it?"

"Fuck. You."

"I took her in and helped her because I knew it was my fault she was

out there. And –“

“DON’T. GIVE ME CRAP. ABOUT HOW YOU LOVE HER LIKE A DAUGHTER.”

“Mike...” Mike’s mom whispers.

“I DON’T CARE, HOPPER. I DON’T CARE.”

“I’m sorry, Mike. I’m sorry.”

More silent fuming.

“I’m sorry, Jane. If you can hear me. I thought I was doing the right thing, and I was wrong.”

You want to break free.

You want to –

You want to –

You want to –

“And I just hope you can forgive me.”

He’s kneeling in front of you now.

“Jane, I...”

He takes a deep breath, holding his face in his hands.

“This is.”

“Do you want us to go, Jim?” Mrs. Byers asks quietly.

“I’m not leaving,” Mike grunts.

“Well the rest of us will,” Nancy says firmly, “Come on, everyone. Let’s go.”

Everyone piles out of the room except for Hopper and Mike.

“Jane,” Hopper whispers, looking choked up, “When I first met you, I only saw you as a problem. I was... fixated... on trying to save Will. I had been looking for him for a week, and I thought we were doomed. I didn’t think about how you were a person. I only thought of you as a bargaining chip. An entity I could use to *finally* put everything right.”

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

Monster.

“I was desperate, and I used you, and I’m sorry. And I don’t know... what’s caused all this. I have my guesses. So I just wanted to say, from the bottom of my heart, that I’m sorry I did that to you. I should have let you had a say. You should always have a say. And I will never do something like that again. And if you wanted to leave and live with another family, I would completely understand.”

You strain.

You want to escape.

You can’t escape.

Not from the memories.

Not from your self-loathing.

Not from the voice.

Escape.

Escape.

Monster.

Monster.

Monsters shouldn't escape.

Monsters should stay trapped.

You're the scariest monster

So you should stay locked up

Locked up in your mind.

"But I want you to know I'm glad that it made me feel guilty enough to take you in. I'm glad that I got to know you. I'm glad that I've gotten to help you grow and grow up and learn who you are as a person. I'm glad I've gotten to be there for all of that. For you finding out what kinds of music you like. For you realizing what you're good at in school. For you trying new foods and learning how to take care of those birds. For you feeling joy and anger and sadness and all the rest. For you becoming Jane. I'm so glad. I'm so glad I've been there for that journey because you are a remarkable, wonderful, kind, generous, *good* person, and you're the best... best daughter a man could ask for. You help everyone around you, you love to make people smile, you love to make people feel safe, but you don't cut corners, you don't let people get away with being mean – you're such a good, kind, wonderful person. I'm so, so, so very proud of you."

He says nothing for a minute.

He looks like he's having trouble getting the words out.

"When Sarah died... she left a hole in my heart. Losing her broke me. Like you're broken now."

Hopper's crying but he does nothing about it.

"And... and... I know I had no right to this. But... but I'm glad you helped me move past that. I'm glad you helped me patch things up inside of me. And I'm glad I realized I could have a family again. I'm glad *you're* my family. I'm glad we've had our joys dancing to music

together, our moments of quiet reading together, our angers when we've gotten furious with each other, our sadness when we've felt lost and helpless. I'm glad we've read all of Anne of Green Gables together. I'm glad we've built all those puzzles together. I'm glad you could help me when I've had nightmares, and I've helped you when you've felt so scared for Mike and your other friends. I'm glad we adopted those birds and have had crazy times with them thinking our heads our perches, and teaching them songs, and cleaning up infinite amounts of poop. I'm glad I've gotten to watch you grow into such a wonderful person, Jane. I love you. You're my little girl. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I hurt you too much by giving you away. I regret it. I regret it with every human and non human cell in my body. I promise. I promise you that," Hopper finishes, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I love you, kiddo. Regardless of what happens next, you'll always be my girl."

He stands up, nods at Mike, and leaves the room.

You can't move.

You want to escape.

You think you have a feeling.

You think you have a thought.

Trapped in here with you.

A thought other than Monster.

Or Memories.

But you can't say it.

You can't escape with it.

It's trapped with you in this web.

Mike walks over and sits next to you, looking straight into your eyes.

As you battle.

And try to break free.

But you can't break free.

Just memories.

Memories and memories and memories and memories.

"Jane."

Your heart strains.

You feel like maybe you can –

Nope –

Still trapped –

Still trapped –

Still trapped –

Memories swirl and swirl and swirl –

"Jane, I love you."

It's like you're screaming inside.

"Jane, I love you. Please talk to me."

Scream Scream Scream Scream Scream Scream Scream Scream
Scream Scream Scream Scream Scream

"Jane, it's not your fault. It's not your fault, alright?"

Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

“I kissed you first. And I’ve loved every single kiss we’ve shared. Loved, Jane. And still love. I would never, *ever*, **ever** trade kissing you and being your boyfriend for not having powers. And look – I’m fine – the doctor says I’m going to be fine.”

You’re a Monster

You’re a Monster

You’re a Monster

You’re a Monster

“You’re not a Monster, Jane. You’re not. I promise. I *promise*. It’s okay. We didn’t know this would happen and I’m absolutely positive that even if we did, I would have kissed you anyway. Hell, even if we didn’t know whether or not I’d survive, I would have kissed you anyway. And this isn’t a depressed-suicidal-Mike thing, either. I think I’d feel that way no matter what. I think that... I think that kissing you and being in love with you and holding you and making you feel happy and safe and loved is more important to me than anything, really. At the very least, its more important than the guarantee I will live. Because really, what guarantee do we have, anyway? Kissing you isn’t that much more of a risk than driving a car, and it’s definitely less of a risk than fighting a Demogorgon. So it’s okay, Jane. It’s okay. You aren’t a monster. This isn’t your fault. You haven’t hurt me, or done anything to me. It’s not your fault.”

You’re a Monster

You’re a Monster

You’re a Monster

You’re a...

You’re a...

You’re a...

You're...

You're...

You're...

You're a monster

No you're not

You're a monster

No you're not

You're a monster

No you're not

You're a monster

No you're not

No you're not

No you're NOT

NO YOU'RE NOT

"You're not a monster. You're a person, Jane. A wonderful person. The kind of person who helps a group of ridiculous, silly boys after knowing them for half a day. The kind of person who trusts one of those boys when he rambles and rambles at her and... sticks her in a closet... without thinking... because his mom's home. The kind of person who sacrifices herself for a group of boys she just met. The kind of person who listens to one of those boys... every day... for three hundred and fifty-three days... The kind of person who lets a man go, a man who abused her, because he has kids. The kind of person who listens and helps all of her friends as they complain about their stupid problems while she has a war raging inside of her. The kind of person who gives a kid a stuffed animal they won at a carnival. The kind of person who forgives their boyfriend for trying to kill himself. The kind of person who just wants the people around

her to be safe, and to be happy. That's who you are. That's the opposite of a monster, Jane. You're a wonderful person. The best person. And I love you so, so, so much."

Mike is crying.

If you could cry, you would be.

You're not a monster.

You're not a monster.

You're not a monster.

You're not a monster.

You are a monster, Eleven.

No.

No.

NO.

You're not a monster.

You're not a monster.

You're not a monster.

You're. Not. A. Monster.

"Please talk to me, Jane. Please come back to me. Please. *Please*," Mike whispers, "I need you, Jane."

The door opens to the room.

People come filing in.

"Jane, you're not a monster," Lucas walks up to you, kneeling next to you with Mike, "You're *not*. You're funny, and kind, and silly, and amazing, and a wonderful person. And I'm so glad you're our friend. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I mistrusted you. I'm sorry I thought you were a

monster. I'm sorry. I didn't mean... I didn't mean to make you think that. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault."

"This is all the fault of those awful men who stole you from your mother and kept you locked up and used you," Bubbe is sitting next to you now, by the head of your bed, "We know what awful men do, Jane. We know what they do to us. Anything that you've done as a reaction to that – within your control, or not – that's not your fault."

"And turning Mike into a psychic like you wasn't in your control," Zayde agrees, "Was I in my own control when I couldn't keep kosher, or celebrate holidays, or anything else in those camps? No, I wasn't. And this isn't in your control. You aren't a monster, Jane."

"No one would think that you're not allowed to live a normal human life, which usually involves kissing," Dustin says, "Jane, seriously. You aren't a monster. And you have a right to kiss the people you want to kiss like anyone else. It's not your fault. You're not a monster at all."

"You're the opposite of a monster. You're a soft, kind, human person. You make me feel better when the other girls at school treat me like crap and you give me someone to relate to in that hellhole we call school – and I like to think you can relate to me, too. You're not a monster, Jane. You're my best friend," Max whispers.

"You're such a sweet kid, Jane. You know, when I first met you, and you were so willing to look for Barb – you hadn't even *met* Barb. And you're so sweet to everyone around you. You get angry sometimes, but that doesn't make you a monster, Jane. It doesn't," Nancy shakes her head, "Everyone has a right to be angry. Especially you."

"They violated you, sweetheart. They didn't let you live the life you wanted and they pumped you with germs and then they isolated you. That's not you being a monster, that's them taking advantage of you," Mike's mom whispers, "You're not a monster, sweetheart. You're a person, a broken person, but a person, and you deserve only good things in this world. Only good things. And one of those things is having Mike by your side. You haven't hurt him. I promise, sweetheart."

"You're a good kid. You have a good head on your shoulders. And you're kind and sweet. You always make sure I'm not too overwhelmed when I'm looking after you chucklefucks. And you look after Mike, which means the whole group of you dipshits stays together. That's not being a monster in my opinion. I used to be a monster. I used girls and I acted like trash to people around me. You've never done any of that. You don't want to hurt anyone, not anyone who hasn't hurt you first. You're not a monster, Jane. I promise," Steve says.

"You're a good kid, and nothing of what's happened is your fault," Jonathan begins, "No one could have controlled any of this. I promise. I promise it isn't your fault, Jane. You're a good kid. You've helped us all so much. And you've been so kind and caring to everyone around you. No one would expect you to be as good as you are, with everything you've been through. But you are. You're the opposite of a monster, Jane. Being weird... it doesn't make you a monster. It just makes you unique."

"You saved my son," Mrs. Byers whispers, "You saved him multiple times. And you helped us all more than we really deserve. You're such a good person, Jane. Please. Please don't think of yourself as a monster, because you're not. You're really, really, *really* not."

"It's not your fault," Will comes up to the bed, kneeling next to you, "Jane, it's not your fault. I promise. I know... some things... about people... controlling you. When you don't want to be controlled. I know what it's like. And you were isolated your whole life. And taken and hurt and forced to be something you didn't want to be. The moment you were free, you started taking back who you are as a person. None of this is your fault. It's the fault of those evil, evil, *awful* men who raised you and made you who you are. And you might have opened the gate, but that's only because they didn't respect your feelings and your fears. And you saved me. And you saved us all, time and time again. So you aren't a monster, Jane. You aren't. You didn't hurt Mike, and you didn't hurt me. *Those men* are the monsters. *Those men* are the ones who have hurt anyone. Not you. Never you. I promise. I *promise*, Jane."

"Please wake up," Mike whispers, tears streaming down his face, "Please, Jane. Please. *Please* wake up. Please."

You can't

You can't

You can't

You can't

Memories swimming swimming swimming swimming

Down down spiral down down

Everyone sighs, but Mike stays by your bed, continually begging. And begging. And begging.

Begging you to wake up.

You're not a monster

You're not a monster

You are a monster, Eleven

No you're not

Yes you are

No you're not

Yes you are

Memories

Remember

Remember

Remember

No

No

No

No

No

No

No

No...

No...

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

Yes

No

No

NO

NO

NO

NO

NO

You're still surrounded by memories

They keep replaying

Over and over and over and over

But you concentrate

Everyone around you is asleep

Except Mike, who is just staring ahead of him, sitting by your side

But you close your eyes

You manage to close your eyes

You close your eyes and focus

Because briefly

Briefly

You've escaped the dark tendrils

The web surrounding you

The memories keep happening

But now you can enter the Void

And you do

You enter it.

"MIKE," you scream, "MIKE. MIKE. MIKE."

You find him in the void.

He isn't *in* the void.

But you shake him.

"MIKE. MIKE. MIKE. MIKE."

He looks up.

He stumbles.

"Jane?" Mike gasps, "Jane!"

"Mike," and you're sobbing, and you fall down to your knees in the shallow water, sobbing and sobbing and sobbing and sobbing.

"Jane –"

He reaches out and touches your shoulder, and you drag him back, back to your mind –

He's in there with you –

"Oh. Oh my God," he whispers, looking around wildly, spinning on his heels as he sees your memories.

"Oh my God. Jane. Jane. Jane," he starts sobbing heavily, falling to his knees next to you, holding his face in his hands.

“Jane, Jane talk to me, talk to me –“

“Mike, help, help, help –“ you whimper, you’re sobbing heavily, you can’t stop sobbing, “Help – help – help – help –“

“Jane I can’t - how do I – How do I help – Jane I don’t know what to do please please please tell me what to do –“

You scream loudly, and you can’t stop crying, and the memories keep flooding you

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God,” Mike is screaming now as he keeps watching the memories with you, “Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God –“

“Help, help, help, help –“ you keep whimpering.

“Jane, Jane I want to – I want to – Oh my God –“ he’s crying with you, holding his head in his hands and staring at his knees, trying to not listen or watch the memories, “Oh my God –“

You’re Hurting Him

You’re Hurting Him

You’re Hurting Him Too

You gasp and stumble forward, but you can’t stop thinking that.

You can feel the blackness closing in on you again.

You’re Hurting Him, Eleven

You’re Hurting Him

“Wait what – who the hell – JANE,” Mike screams, looking up and seeing you.

You look down.

You’re actually being grabbed by something.

You’re actually –

What –

“LET HER GO! LET HER GO! SHE ISN’T A MONSTER, LET HER GO!” Mike screams, rushing forward. He’s knocked back by something as more and more of you is overtaken by the tendrils.

“LET HER GO! LET HER GO! *YOU’RE THE MONSTER, NOT HER! LET HER GO! LET HER GO!*” he screams and screams and screams, but he can’t get to you.

“MIKE –“

“JANE –“

“MIKE HELP –“

“JANE, I’M COMING, I’M COMING, I’M GOING TO HELP, I PROMISE –“

“MIKE, MIKE, MIKE –“

“JANE, I’LL HELP, I’LL HELP, I’LL –“

He tries to break through but he keeps getting pushed back.

“JANE –“

“MIKE –“

“I’LL FIGURE THIS OUT, I’LL SAVE YOU, I’LL FIGURE THIS OUT, I’LL SAVE YOU –“

“MIKE, PLEASE –“

"I'LL COME BACK, JANE, I WILL, I'M COMING BACK, I HAVE TO FIGURE THIS OUT –"

"MIKE, DON'T GO –"

"I LOVE YOU JANE –"

"MIKE –"

"I LOVE YOU –"

"MIKE –"

He tries to break through again, but is pushed back

You watch, screaming, though you can barely do anything –

Mike disappears in a puff of smoke –

And you return, enveloped by your memories

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember, Eleven.

Remember you're a monster.

And that will never change.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't even know what to leave you guys with after that one.

Just, ya know, she's catatonic (it's very very very rough to try and write catatonia, I've never been catatonic so this is probably all 100% inaccurate, and

let's just chalk it up to the thing in her head). And it's only partly because of her own mental illness. That should be obvious at this point I think, but you know, might as well make that obvious.

Isn't this fun *cackles quietly*

I'll try to get the new chapter out as soon as I can. I know the suspense is Ultra High right now. So, to encourage me updating ASAP, why not... leave a comment :D <3 thank you all for the wonderful (if stressed) comments so far. You all are my heroes and why I work so hard on this story every day. :)

29. Spiral Through Infinity

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for mentions & allusions to childhood sexual abuse, as well as a nihilistic view of humanity being espoused there for a bit

If you want the atmospheric music for this chapter, here you go: [https://listenonrepeat.com/watch/?v=fZJ0bR6vwHk#Sweet_Dreams_\(A_Wrinkle_In_Time_Trailer_Song\)](https://listenonrepeat.com/watch/?v=fZJ0bR6vwHk#Sweet_Dreams_(A_Wrinkle_In_Time_Trailer_Song))

Yes, yes I am listening to this on repeat one while I write. Why do you ask?

S E P T E M B E R 9 1 9 8 6

M I K E L E V I N S O N

“I’m telling you, Jane isn’t catatonic!”

“Mike, that’s the only explanation we have, and we have to start the treatments right away –“

“No! No! I mean, she isn’t *just* catatonic!”

“Okay, describe what you saw again, kid,” Hopper sighs, starting to cough heavily.

“Okay do you really think that he *and Dustin* should be in here?” Steve snaps, pointing to Hopper as he coughs, “If there’s something wrong with Jane, maybe we’ll *all get infected with whatever this is* –“

“We don’t have any evidence that she’s infected with anything –“

“SHE IS! I’M TELLING YOU, SHE IS!” you scream.

“Okay, describe what you saw again,” Hopper repeats.

“I was in the void. Jane reached me in the void. She then – I think she partially dragged me into her mind? But she couldn’t the whole

way. And she had... she has these..."

You want to vomit.

You run over to the bathroom of the room and vomit.

"Zeisele, zeisele, you need – you need to rest –" Bubbe cries.

"NO!" you scream.

You walk back out into the room and, without really giving a fuck, start putting on your clothing underneath your hospital gown.

"I'm not sick from the stupid psychic bacteria, I'm sick from – from what I saw," you shout, pulling off the gown when you have pants on.

"Michael –"

"There's something wrong with her. And it's more than just her mental illness."

"Michael, I want to believe you," Doctor Owens says, "But we've done NMRI scans on her. She doesn't match the patterns of infection for normal infections, *or* what we saw with Will two years ago."

"Maybe the Mind Flayer has learned, or maybe it's something different this time, but I'm telling you, I saw something that looked *just like the Mind Flayer* – or whatever grabbed Will two years ago – or those stupid vines from the stupid tunnels – it looked just like that, okay! So I don't know, I don't know *why* her brain scan didn't look like Will's but I'm telling you, *I'm telling you*, I'm telling you that something *has her*."

"Okay, go over it again," Mom begs.

"So I couldn't sleep. I was too worried about Jane. I was just staring out into space. Suddenly I felt her... in my mind... reaching out to me. Like, kind of like the year we were apart, when she *almost* told me she was there but didn't. So I entered the Void, too, and met up with her. And I saw a glimpse of her mind, what's going on in there," you take a deep breath.

You can't.

You can't even.

You don't want to picture it.

Everything you saw.

It was too.

Too much.

Much much much too much.

Overwhelming.

Spinning.

Awful.

Awful awful awful awful *awful*.

"She's trapped. In traumatic memories. From the Lab," you manage to say, "I can't... I can't tell you. I can't describe them. They're too awful."

Doctor Owens looks at you and you glare back at him.

"Is this what I think it is?"

You nod.

He gets up and starts pacing.

"Did you *know they did this?*" you scream.

"I had a guess."

"WHY DIDN'T YOU DO ANYTHING?"

"I wasn't involved with the department at the time. I worked with another branch of the Department of Energy's... secret work. I only came by the facility a few times. But... I got a hunch," Doctor Owens

mutters.

“YOU SHOULD HAVE SAID OR DONE SOMETHING –“

“You’re right. I should have.”

You look at him in shock, and he keeps looking at you.

“I thought that at the time. That I should do something. I was a coward.”

You swallow and look away.

Now wasn't the time to get more into it.

“Okay.”

“What else did you see?”

“Soon after I saw... all those... memories...” you try to not throw up again, “I saw this black – thing – *like the mind flayer* – coming up and just, surrounding Jane. It just took over. I could barely hear her scream.”

Everyone looks at you in horror.

“We have to do something. We have to. We have to,” you beg, “We have to.”

“What could you *possibly do*?” Lucas shouts, “What the *fuck can we do*?”

“Okay here’s the big question, and I mean, the *big question*,” Dustin mutters, “How the hell did the Mind Flayer come back and attack her when we closed the gate?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, I’m the dumbest in this party and even *I’ve* figured that out,” Steve roars, “It’s obvious, Dustin!”

“What –“

“YOU AND HOPPER HAVE BEEN COUGHING UP BLACK SHIT FOR YEARS!”

Dustin looks over at Hopper, and Hopper looks back at him.

“But that’s... not...”

“Think about it,” Mrs. Byers whispers, “Hopper was in those tunnels, breathing everything in, for over a day. And...”

“And Dustin got a big gust of it inside his mouth when we were setting them on fire,” Lucas whispers.

“Okay but we’re fine, apart from coughing the shit up. But the Mind Flayer hasn’t overtaken *our* minds,” Hopper interjects, shaking his head, “So then –”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Everyone turns to Will, who’s looking at everyone in shock.

“Last time the only person who managed to defeat him was Jane. Yeah, sure, the rest of you guys put dents into his forces – burned him out of me, distracted the Demo-dogs, whatever. But he could have fought us all off... if it weren’t for Jane,” Will mutters.

“Okay...” Hopper frowns.

“So, he still had an in to this universe through you two,” Will continues, “But he’s been... expelling himself – growing and then expelling out of your lungs – in order to travel to Jane’s.”

Everyone looks at each other in shock.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coughing up this stuff, Jim?” Doctor Owens asks seriously.

“Because... I don’t know. I thought it was my smoking or something,” Hopper groans.

“I... didn’t think to say anything. Sorry,” Dustin mumbles.

“I’m going to examine all of your lungs and – didn’t you say you vomited it once?” Doctor Owens asks.

Dustin and Hopper both nod.

“Right. Lungs and digestive tracts. And hers too. Jim, is that alright?”

“Yeah,” Hopper mutters.

“It’s going to be difficult because of her state, but she should respond a *little* to stimuli to get her to do what we need her to do –“

“Yeah, yeah, let’s just get on with it.”

“I’m going home,” you mutter, “I need to think.”

“Mike –“

You leave without another word, walking down the stairs and out of the building, going towards your mom’s car.

You take the stolen keys and drive, without looking back.

You don’t even think about the fact that you’re doing this alone for the first time.

You just drive back to your house, put the car into park, and walk into your room.

And you pace.

And you pace.

And you pace.

And you pace.

You can’t stop those images in your brain.

Watching that happen to Jane.

Young Jane.

Young.

So.

So.

So very young.

Much much much too young.

You go over and make a move to vomit again, but it hurts too much and all that comes up is air. Your stomach is empty.

You reach into the freezer and grab Eggos, eating them just straight out of the box.

Too much.

All too much.

Too much to think about.

You can't.

You can't.

No wonder she broke down.

You wander back into your room, put on your blindfold, and turn on the radio for static.

You enter the Void.

You sigh.

You concentrate.

And you walk straight into the past.

You open your eyes in the Lab.

You look around and you quickly hide behind a wall.

Gotta find Jane.

Gotta find Jane.

Gotta find Jane.

Gotta save Jane.

Gotta save Jane.

Gotta save Jane.

“Yes, we should test that next,” you hear a voice say, as footsteps approach you from down the hall.

“Have we considered the effects of the timing though –“

“No we haven’t. We should run some analyses on that.”

“Dr. Brenner – Dr. Brenner –“

You stay crouched, behind a trash can, even though you’re a little bit too tall to get away with it entirely.

You watch as the two scientists meet the third, all three talking together in hushed voices.

“I’ll check on her then.”

You watch as the other two walk away, and the literal Epitome of Evil walks in a different direction.

You get up and you follow him.

Crouching behind various walls.

Walking as quietly as you can.

You watch as he reaches a door, fumbling with some keys in his hands.

Now’s your chance.

Now’s your *only* chance.

You rush forward, screaming at the top of your lungs.

“What the –“

You tackle him to the ground.

You immediately start punching him in the face, as hard as you can.

“LEAVE! JANE! ALONE!” you scream, “LEAVE! HER! ALONE!”

The Epitome of Evil looks at you in shock for a minute before pushing you off of him easily. You fall to the ground, grunting in pain.

“You. I’ve seen you before,” he hisses, “How did you get in here?”

“Wouldn’t you like to *fucking know*,” you shout, before reaching up to kick him in the groin. He gasps in pain, and you get up to go to the door and rescue Jane –

You don’t even care what it would mean –

“HEY! YOU!”

You turn around to see security guards running towards you –

Armed –

You shout in surprise and disappear as quickly as you can.

You land back in the present, panting heavily.

You pull off the blindfold and wipe off both of your bloody nostrils.

Shit.

Shit.

You couldn’t even do that.

You couldn’t fix this.

You can’t change the past.

No one can.

You go to your bed and press your face into the pillows, sobbing heavily.

You can't stop crying.

You can't stop thinking about what you saw.

About how they hurt her.

About what they might have done to her had they gotten her back again.

And you can't stop sobbing.

You just want to help her.

You just want her to be Okay.

You hear the door to the house open, so you look up.

Bubbe, Zayde, Mrs. Byers, and your Mom all walk in.

"Hey Mike," Mom whispers, sitting next to you, "How are you doing?"

"Bad," you grumble.

"Doctor Owens confirmed it – that she's infected with something from the Upside Down, and they are too – Dustin and Hopper. So they're both staying at the lab until we can figure out how to get rid of it," Mrs. Byers sighs, "We just came back to get you."

"Get me? Why?"

"We think you need to go in there and save Jane," Bubbe mutters softly.

"I can't –"

"You're the only one who can talk to her right now," Zayde sighs, "And, at the very least, maybe you can help her fight off this monster herself."

"You don't – you don't understand. I can't go back in there," you whisper, "I can't... see it all again."

"Are you ready to tell us what happened to her, Mike?" your mom asks quietly.

You just shake your head.

"Alright," she sighs.

"I think you need to try to talk to her," Bubbe laments, "I don't think we have any other choice."

You swallow.

"I'm scared."

"We know," Zayde whispers, "We are too."

You take another deep breath.

You think of Jane.

Surrounded.

By all of it.

"Okay. Okay. I'll do it."

"Thank you," Mrs. Byers murmurs, "We'll be there with you, the whole way."

"And we all believe in you," Zayde agrees.

"Thank you," you murmur, "Alright... alright... let's go."

You give the car keys back to your mom and follow them all out of the house, the night sky growing dark around you all.

You realize that was the same conversation as your first vision of the future – just a few things changed.

A shiver runs down your spine.

You should have known.

You should have known everything would break for *months*.

You should have said something to her *months and months ago*.

But you'll fix it now.

Now, you're going to fix it.

You're going to set it right.

Your mom drives silently alone with you as Mrs. Byers drives with Bubbe and Zayde behind you. They turn off on another road, presumably to drop off Zayde with Chester and Eddie.

"Can you tell just me, alone?" your mom asks quietly.

"No," you whisper.

"How bad *is it*?"

"On a scale of one to ten this is one hundred."

"Oh Michael..."

"Look, just. Don't. Don't make me think about it," you take a deep breath, "I'm barely using my coping mechanisms right now. I'm on the edge of a break. Just give me. Give me time to collect myself for this."

"Of course, sweetheart. Of course."

You nod again and keep staring out the window at the dwindling light outside.

You pull up to the lab and walk back inside, not looking back at your mom or even at the front receptionist as you continue your way back upstairs.

Everyone looks at you expectantly when you enter the room.

"Mike, thank God –" Lucas breathes.

“Shut the fuck up. None of you know how *fucked up* everything is right now,” you shout, “Leave me alone. All of you. Now. Just. Just go to another damn room.”

“But –“

“NOW!”

Everyone scrambles out and you shut the door behind them, locking it. You take a deep breath and rest your forehead against the door, breathing in slowly and carefully, though your whole body is shaking.

You then turn around and walk back over to Jane.

“I’m really weak,” you mumble to her, as she just stares out straight ahead without reacting, “I’m really, really, *really* tired, Jane.”

A sob leaves your lips.

“I’m so tired. But I’m going to help. I’m going to help. I promise.”

You grab the hospital radio and put it on static.

You kick everything out of the way and lie down on the ground next to her bed.

You take her hand.

You put on your blindfold.

You sit back up.

You take a deep breath.

And you focus.

Void.

Everything black.

It always feels like you’re being suffocated.

But you take a deep breath and keep walking through the water.

You see Jane lying down again.

You walk up to her and you kneel next to her.

“Jane?”

She doesn't respond.

She just stares at you blankly like she does out there.

You focus.

You focus on her.

But nothing happens.

“Shit,” you grunt, “Shit – fuck – fuck – shit – fuck. Jane.”

No reaction.

“Jane, I want to help, I'm *going* to help. I promise. I'm going to help. But I... I need you... I need you to pull me back into your head. I can't do it on my own. I don't know how, Jane. I don't know how. Remember –“

You take a deep breath.

“Remember when we went to the Snow Ball? And... and... I asked if you wanted to dance, and you said you didn't know how, and I said I didn't either, and that we'd figure it out together?”

You take a deep breath.

“Jane. Jane, we need to figure this out together.”

“Please break free. You're not a monster, okay? You're not a monster. You're not. You're not. You're not. You're not.”

She still doesn't respond.

You rest your forehead against hers and just wait.

“Come on, Jane. You can do it. You can break free again. Come on. Come on. You can do this. You can do this. You can do this.”

“Jane. I love you. I believe in you.”

You stand up and start pacing in the void, the water splashing around your feet as you hold your hands up to the sky.

“COME ON, JANE! YOU CAN DO THIS!”

She still lies there, so you keep shouting.

“COME ON! COME ON! COME ON! COME ON!”

You spin around on your heels, walking in circles.

“ALRIGHT, HASHEM. I DON’T FUCKING KNOW IF YOU’RE REAL OR NOT. BUT GIVE ME A FUCKING MIRACLE. GIVE ME A MIRACLE, GOD. GIVE ME ONE. GIVE ME JUST ONE, DAMN, MIRACLE.”

You keep pacing in silence as nothing happens.

“COME ON! HAVEN’T YOU PUT THIS STUPID IDIOT THROUGH HIS PACES ENOUGH? HELP JANE OUT, YOU BASTARD, HELP JANE OUT!”

“SHEMA YISRAEL! ADONAI ELOHEINU! ADONAI ECHAD! SHEMA YISRAEL! ADONAI ELOHEINU! ADONAI ECHAD! SHEMA YISRAEL! ADONAI ELOHEINU! ADONAI ECHAD! SHEMA YISRAEL! ADONAI ELOHEINU! ADONAI *ECHAD! COME ON!*”

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE, YOU BASTARD, **COME ON!**”

“**COME ON!**”

“**COME ON!**”

“**COME ON!!!!**”

You turn around at a small sound.

Jane is looking at you.

Her eyes have moved in your direction.

“Mike?”

Her voice is so small you can barely hear it, but you run over to her immediately.

“Jane, Jane it’s me, it’s me, I’m here –“

“Mike, I can’t –“

“Drag me into your mind.”

“What?”

“Drag me in. I’ll help you fight the thing off. I promise. I’m here to help.”

“But...”

“Just get me into your head. I’ll find my way from there. I promise. Just get me in.”

“I can’t –“

“Just get me in, Jane, I promise, I’ll help, I’ll get you out of this, I promise, *please* –“

“Okay. I’ll try,” she whispers.

You hold onto her hand.

She looks at you.

You look at her.

You don’t want to cry.

Don’t cry.

Don’t cry.

Don’t cry –

And you're in another space.

It's black, like the void.

But you don't see Jane anymore.

And the floor isn't water anymore.

And there's just a voice.

This strange, otherworldly, gravely voice that sounds a little like Jane and a little like Will and a little like Hopper and a little like Dustin and a little like everyone all speaking together.

"You're a Monster, Eleven. You're a Monster. And now you're taking Mike down with you. He's going to get trapped in your mess forever with you. You're a monster. A horrible horrible –"

You grit your teeth and start walking, ignoring the voice as much as you can.

You're lost.

You feel like you're suffocating in this big, black, empty space.

You have no idea where you are, but you know you're somewhere in Jane's mind.

So you keep walking forward.

You wish you had a flashlight or *something* to help you see. But you just walk anyway.

You notice a dip.

A dip in the infinite, indistinguishable floor below you.

As the voice keeps taunting Jane, you start to follow the dip. You walk along it, and it's small and narrow, almost too small for you to move along it, but you do.

You keep walking, holding your hands out for balance, trying to not fall as you go. The dip keeps going down, at an angle, around a

curve.

You look up and you still see the blackness all around you, but you can see, a little, distinct from everything else, the path you're traveling.

Everything is infinite around you.

You feel too small as you go down the narrow, winding, spiraling –

Spiral.

It's a spiral.

This is Jane's mind spiral.

You gasp in shock and keep walking, even though you feel so, so, so lost.

Like you're being enveloped by the darkness.

Like infinity is reminding you exactly how nothing you are.

Keep going.

Keep going.

Keep going.

You walk down and down and down.

As the spiral tightens.

But it started out so large that it hasn't reached a point yet.

It just keeps going.

Down and down and down and down.

You wonder if *your* mind looked like this.

Back last November.

Don't think about that now.

Just keep going down.

And down.

And down.

And down.

And it's almost like the world around you is expanding so that the spiral can continue.

You don't know how you're making out the difference between equally infinite and vast shades of black around you, but you can kind of make it out –

Make it out that as you descend, everything expands.

But you keep going down the curve.

Down and down and down and down.

As the spiral tightens and tightens and tightens and tightens.

And the voice taunts and taunts and taunts and taunts and taunts.

You're getting dizzy, and you worry you're going to fall as you make your way down –

It's getting too steep –

Much, much, *much* too steep –

You keep going, but you're going to fall –

You hold out your arms to your sides as you keep making your way, putting one foot directly in front of the other, as though you're walking along a tightrope, down, down, down –

In an infinite amount of blackness –

You set your face to a determined expression.

And you keep walking.

Down.

Down.

Down.

“I’m coming, Jane. I’m coming,” you mutter quietly, just making your way.

Infinite.

Infinite.

This is probably what space is like, where there are no stars or anything else.

It’s too much for you to comprehend right now.

You just have to keep walking.

“He’s coming, he’s coming, and you’re going to be the reason he dies —“

“SHUT UP YOU DICK!” you scream, “JUST SHUT UP AND LEAVE MY JANE ALONE!”

The voice keeps taunting her.

So you keep going down.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Down the tightrope.

Down –

It suddenly gives way underneath you.

You scream, holding your arms up above your head

As you fall

Fall

Fall

Fall –

Wham!

You land on the ground, groaning in pain.

“This isn’t your actual body,” you grumble to yourself, “Come on. Get up. Get up.”

You pull yourself together and up off the floor, walking weakly across a smooth, non-sloping ground again.

It’s still infinitely black.

But the voice is louder, now.

So you follow the voice.

“I’m coming to save you, Jane. I’m going to save you,” you mutter quietly, “I don’t know if you can hear me moving around in here but I’m going to save you. I promise. I promise. *I promise.*”

It’s hard to convince *yourself* when you’re in an infinite dark vast sea of nothingness.

“Come now, Michael.”

You whirl around in a circle, looking around everywhere for the voice.

“Do you *really* think you can save her?”

You breathe rapidly.

You wish you had a weapon.

You wish you had *anything*.

“Do you *really* think you can beat *me*?”

“WHO ARE YOU?” you scream, “GET OUT OF HER HEAD YOU MONSTER –“

“Be careful with how you use that word, Michael. Wouldn’t want to have the pot call the kettle black.”

You whirl around again.

“WHERE ARE YOU?”

“I am everywhere, Michael.”

You can’t stop your heart from beating much much much too fast.

And your mind is racing.

“I am all around you. You think your precious Jane’s mind is like this normally?”

You swallow.

“You didn’t – make up those memories – did you –“

“No, no. No. You see why I want to make your species extinct, Michael.”

You swallow again.

You can feel things creeping around your arms and legs, like smoke.

You flail your arms around as rapidly as you can.

“Your species is a species that does things like that to innocent little girls, Michael.”

You let out a sob, but you keep flailing, and you start running as fast as you can.

“You can’t run away from me, Michael. I am all around you.”

You keep running anyway.

You had to find Jane.

You had to find Jane in this mess.

“You and I are the same, Michael.”

You stop in your tracks.

“WE ARE NOT THE SAME,” you scream, “WE ARE NOT THE SAME
_“

“We are the same. You value humanity as much as I do.”

“What are you talking about –“

“Look at your species. Your species is disgusting.”

“Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it –“

“Your men – and women – attack and rape and beat little children.
They attack and rape each other.”

“Stop it –“

“They kill and attack each other and hate each other based on the
color of their skin, the shape of their noses, the texture of their hair
_“

“Stop it stop it stop it –“

“They discriminate and decide that each other are lesser because of
the parts between their legs –“

“STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT –“

“They deny men and women the right to love who they want and *be*
who they want –“

“STOP. STOP. STOP. STOP.”

“They fight and die in pointless wars and care more about money

than the lives of each other –“

“Stop...” you fall to your knees, “Stop...”

“They build giant, terrible weapons that drive everyone into fear and even more hatred for decades!”

“Please...” you whimper, “Please... stop...”

“I hate humans as much as you do. Why, you should not hate me as much as you do. We agree, you see. We agree.”

“Please...”

“Even the humans close to you, the ones you thought you could trust. Look at what that police chief did, did to you, did to your Jane, did to everyone.”

You let out a wordless sob.

“All humans are awful. All deserve to be destroyed.”

“No... no... no...”

“Tell you what, Michael. Let’s make a deal.”

You look up, tears streaming down your face as the smoke envelops all around you.

“All I want is what you want. All I want is to see this steaming mass of filth and horror destroyed, just like you.”

You let out another sob.

“I’ll spare you and Jane, in return for you both leaving me alone. You let me carry out my tasks, and you both get to be happy together.”

Something warm seems to fill you from all around.

“You don’t have to worry about anyone else hurting either of you ever again. Isn’t that what you want?”

The idea gives you peace.

A part of it seems to sing to you.

You could keep Jane safe.

You could keep Jane safe –

No.

No.

No.

This is *sick*.

This is insane.

“No,” you whisper.

“No?”

“No!” you stand up, moving away from the smoke, “No!”

“You don’t get to say no to me –“

“HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT AWFUL,” you scream, “WE ARE FLAWED, BUT NOT DEVOID OF MERIT –“

You take a deep breath.

“I am human. Jane is human. And even flawed humans do good things. Hopper took care of Jane. Mrs. Byers can be a bad mom sometimes but she cares about her kids. We all make mistakes. I’ve made a million. Jane’s made a million. But we still do good things. We help each other. We love each other. We protect each other, and care for each other.”

You take another breath, still walking as fast as you can away from the smoke trying to follow you.

“And just because there are some really evil humans out there doesn’t mean that the rest of us are doomed. For fuck’s sake, you’re not God,” you shout, “You don’t just get to kill everyone! That’s not how this works!”

“You are all impure –“

“NO! No! We are getting better! Every day we get just a little bit better. We know just a little bit more,” you shout, “That’s what progress is. We’re much better on so many things now than we used to be. I don’t have to worry about living in a *ghetto* anymore. Lucas can go to college. Jane can have whatever fucking job she wants and she doesn’t *have* to have kids if she doesn’t want to. It keeps getting better and we all keep working to make it better! That’s what being alive is about! Making the world just a little bit better of a place!”

You whirl around to face the smoke. It halts in front of you, tendrils coming out of it like the tentacles of a squid.

“TIKKUN FUCKING OLAM, *BITCH*,” you scream, and you run through the smoke, making all of it dissipate into nothingness.

You fall to the ground, panting heavily.

“You fool,” the voice of the Mind Flayer is quieter now, “You cannot defeat me for long, you know this –“

You run, not even responding to him, just run away from where you were.

Where is Jane.

Have to find Jane.

“If I can’t take out you and Jane –“

You keep running, towards the source of the voice –

He would be with Jane –

“If I can’t defeat you two, then I will defeat all of your friends –“

You want to stop in your tracks.

But you keep running.

And running.

And running.

“And you will have no one to help you –“

Go go go go go go go go go go go –

“And you will die.”

Go go go go go go go go –

“And, then, I will kill everyone else.”

GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO -

“Your precious humanity will be no more, Michael.”

You keep running.

Running.

Running.

Running.

“And neither will you.”

Running.

Running.

Running.

Running.

“And, soon, neither will Jane.”

“AA!”
you scream, you scream, you scream, you scream, you scream you
scream –

As loud as you can –

As long as you can –

As more and more and more smoke disappears –

Until –

It looks different.

It looks entirely different.

The spiral is still there, going deep down through the space.

But the space is filled with many more things.

Stories playing in the head, and facts and figures about science and math that look totally different from how you think about them, and memories all around you, mostly *of* you –

Wow you look different –

And pictures and words and feelings and smells and sounds and –

You see Jane

At the foot of the spiral

Trapped in a box of memories, surrounded by them

Memories of what happened.

And she's in a hospital gown, like she is outside, and she's curled up into a ball, and crying, and she doesn't look like she can stop.

You run forward as fast as you can and dive to her side.

"M... Mike?" she whispers.

"Jane, Jane I'm here, I did it, I'm here," you whisper.

You feel too weak.

Much, much, *much* too weak.

"Mike," she mumbles, "He'll come back –"

“I know –“

“You didn’t... get rid of him fully –“

“I know, I know, just, listen to me, okay? Just listen to me,” you take her hands into yours, “Look, I’m going to disappear soon –“

“What, Mike, no –“

“I’m fine, I’m just too weak to stay in here, that – I’m not as strong as you – I’ll never be as strong as you –“

“But –“

“*Listen to me.* Listen. *Listen,*” you take a deep breath.

“*You have to escape these memories.*”

“What –“

“You can defeat him if you can get yourself out of this spiral. Did remembering... all of this... did it cause you to start slipping? That’s why you were sick the other day?”

She nods multiple times.

“Okay. Okay, Jane. Okay. You need to pull yourself out of this part of it. If you do that, you can fight him off the whole way –“

“I can’t –“

“Yes you can –“

“I can’t –“

“If I could do it for a bit, you could do it –“

“Not the whole way. I. I t-ried...”

“Then I’ll rest and come back and help but you *have to pull yourself out of these memories* – “

“H-how?”

“Those men are evil,” you whisper softly, “Evil. Evil evil evil.”

She starts sobbing again.

“And what they did to you was awful. Awful awful awful.”

She keeps sobbing.

“But Jane. You won already.”

She looks up at you.

“You are alive. You are living a life you want to live. You have friends and family to surround you, and you’re going to school, and you’re a part of the *world*. You’re a person, Jane,” you whisper, “Not a monster. *Never* a monster – not in general, and not their monster, either.”

You swallow.

“You belong to yourself. You get to be whoever you want to be. You *won*. You *won*. You won yourself, you won your mind, you won your body. You got away. And now you get to control every part of yourself and decide what you want with your mind, with your body, and with your *life*. You *won*, Jane, and that’s *amazing*.”

You take a deep breath.

“*Amazing*.”

She looks at you, tears streaming, but she’s stopped sobbing.

“You kept living, *despite them*, and you’ll *keep living in spite of them*. And you get to choose what happens. Whether that means staying with us all, or leaving Hopper, or leaving me – you get to choose. You get to choose who you are and where you go and who you love,” you take another breath, “And I just want you to be happy. So you get to choose what makes you happy. You get to choose your life. *You won*. And you have to *keep choosing* to spite them, okay? You have to.”

You squeeze her hands tightly while she watches you with more tears

threatening to spill over in her eyes.

“Look, I know this is awful. I know it all hurts more than you can bear. I know. *I know*. Because I’m in here with you *and I can’t bear it either*. But right now you have to focus on the fact that *you got out of that Lab*. You got out of there, and you’re not going to let some fucking ethnic-cleansing demon shadow monster win. You’re *not*. And when you get him out of your head, then you can tackle this horrible, horrible, *awful thing*. Okay? One step at a time, please, *please* Jane.”

She nods.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

She leans in and kisses you.

It’s not like other kisses.

It’s not tinged with sadness, or happiness, or even those feelings you don’t want to acknowledge, especially now.

It’s just.

A kiss.

Like you’re being enveloped in how she feels about you and it’s surrounded you on all sides and –

You guess it actually has –

Because you’re inside her mind –

You wrap your arms tightly around her and hold her to you, breaking away when she makes the slightest move that she wishes to move away.

“Mike?”

“Jane?”

“I love you.”

“I love you,” you respond, reaching out for her hand.

“You’ll... you’ll come back?”

“As soon as I can.”

“Okay.”

“Keep trying. Keep fighting.”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

You kiss her again, before blinking out of her head.

You wake up on the floor of the lab, your mouth sticky – you reach to touch it – blood is all over it.

You groan quietly and sit up, holding your aching, pounding head in your hands.

You look over at Jane, who’s still the same.

But you can see a tear rolling out of her eye.

You get up, straighten yourself off, and walk over to the door, opening it weakly.

“I need –“

Everyone’s looking at you in fear.

“What’s... what’s going on,” you ask.

“Hopper and Dustin have passed out,” your mom whispers.

“What?”

“They’re in comas,” Doctor Owens says quietly, “They passed out while you were in there.”

You watch them all in shock.

“What... *what?*”

“We can’t wake them up –“

You hold your head in your hands.

It pounds.

It pounds.

It pounds.

It pounds.

“Do you want to tell us what’s going on with Jane?” Mrs. Byers asks, her face as white as a sheet.

“When Jane was in the Lab,” you whisper, “She...”

Doctor Owens sighs.

“Should I just tell them, since I believe I’ve guessed what you saw?”

You nod.

“She was sexually abused by some of the men here –“

Everyone starts shouting but you cut them off.

“Not just that. Dr. Brenner raped her,” you whisper.

Everyone’s silent in horror, looking at you with gaping mouths.

“And the Mind Flayer is using her trauma and insecurities to trap her in her mind,” you continue, “I... I helped her some. But I need to energy up and go back in there. She has to fight him off because, well, she’s stronger than me, but she needs... she needs help. She can’t do it on her own. I need to be able to talk to her as she fights, and maybe help a little.”

“What do we do?”

You take a deep breath.

"I need to get my energy back..."

You look around at them all grimly.

"And we're going to need a bathtub."

Notes for the Chapter:

WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO THIS IS ALL COMING TOGETHER AND ITS AWESOME okay

Couple of things:

1) The way time travel works in this story is that the future is always in flux (ie, free will exists, and what you do can influence the future) but the past is set. So it is already set in stone that Mike will travel back to certain points in the past. It's just not set in stone when in his timeline he will. So yes, that takes away some of his free will, but, there you go. So him traveling back in an attempt to stop Brenner from raping Jane already had happened, and they effected nothing about the future. Yes, this is complicated and hard to understand. Work with me here.

2) If you're wondering "did Mike attacking Brenner egg him on to do the evil thing" I'm not answering that question out of my own sanity

3) I refuse to fall into the "male character learns the special skill of female character and is magically better at it than her instantly" narrative. Mike will never be better at using these powers than Jane. Jane will always be stronger. The end.

4) Who's ready for SOME MORE FUN TIMES?!?!?!?

5) Please comment, thank you all for your wonderful comments so far <3 <3 <3 and if you didn't get a chance to comment on the last chapter, please,

please comment on both!!!! This is all some of the stuff I've been really excited to write, and I really want to know what you all think!!! Thank you :)

30. Good and Bad

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for mentions of self-loathing thoughts, references to childhood sexual abuse, and suicidal desires

This chapter gets more abstract because there's internal dialogue (so without quotes) between the Mind Flayer and Jane, so just, keep that in mind

S E P T E M B E R 1 0 1 9 8 6

J A N E H O P P E R

You wish you could do this.

You wish you could fight off the monster.

But you just have no idea how to.

Everything is swimming, and everything is terrifying, and you feel lost and scared and alone and Mike isn't there.

Mike isn't there.

Why isn't Mike there?

Memories

Memories

Remember

Remember

You don't get to escape

You have to keep remembering

Remember

Remember

Remember

You won

Mike's words echo in your ears

You are alive. You are living a life you want to live. You have friends and family to surround you.

You're a person, Jane. Not a monster. Never a monster.

You belong to yourself.

You get to be whoever you want to be.

You won. You won.

You'll keep living in spite of them.

But you're so tired.

You're so very, very, very tired

You just wish you could slip away

You just wish all of this was over.

But you know that you can't

You know you have to keep fighting.

Come on, Jane.

Stop –

Jane, you know that you cannot defeat me.

Leave me *alone* –

I'm going to stay here, and I will keep you trapped –

GO AWAY

Your Mike should have taken the deal

GO AWAY

Now you're both doomed

GO AWAY

Just like the rest of your whole family

GO AWAY

I'm going to kill you all, Jane

GO AWAY

And then the whole world

GO AWAY

You all deserve it anyway

GO AWAY

Awful, awful creatures, all of you

GO AWAY

Look at what they did to you, Jane

GO AWAY

They turned you into a monster, Jane

GO AWAY

And now you as a monster

GO AWAY

Why, you turned that sweet, sweet boy into a monster too

GO AWAY

And now you'll doom you all

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO AWAY

GO

GO

GO

GO

GO

GO

GO

GO

AWAY

You scream inside your head

You scream and scream and scream and scream

And you refuse to stop

But you can't get the monster to leave

You can't get him to go out

No matter how much you scream

And you're so, so, so tired

And you don't know how to keep going

You can only remember

Remember

Remember

Remember

Remember every single awful thing

Every touch

Every glance

Every invasion

Every violation

And you're so trapped in the spiral of memories

That you can't think anymore

You can't breathe

You can't think

You can't breathe

You can't think

You can't breathe

You just want all of it to end

You just want to stop existing

You just wish that you didn't have to think about this anymore

About how you're a monster

Before you were even born

They dictated that you'd be a monster before you were even born

Even what *kind* of monster

And then they stole you

Made you even more of a monster

Made sure you knew that you didn't belong to yourself, but to them

Every part of you, to them

They perfected you

They honed you

They broke you down

And built you back up

In the image they wanted

And then they made you blow open the world

Kill people

Hurt everyone

Hurt Mike

Hurt Mike

Hurt Mike

Hurt Mike

Hurt Mike

Hurt Mike

Hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt

Monster monster monster monster monster monster monster monster

You're doomed, Jane

They violated you and you're doomed to be broken forever

Broken forever, Jane

You're a permanently broken girl

You might as well give in to me now, Eleven

Make all of this faster

Less painful for you

Less painful for Mike

Isn't that what you want?

To give him less pain?

Shouldn't you just give in now

So that he won't hurt any more?

I think that would probably be better for everyone

For you

For Mike

For Me

For the others

Come on now, Jane

Come on

Give in, Eleven

Give in to me

Give –

NO

NO

NO

NO

NO

NO

NOT GIVING IN TO ANYONE

NOT EVER AGAIN

YOUR BODY IS YOUR OWN

YOU ARE YOUR OWN PERSON

YOU ARE YOURS

YOU ARE YOURS

YOU ARE YOURS

YOU ARE YOURS

GET

OUT

OF

HERE

GET

OUT

OF

HERE

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

GET

OUT

OUT

OUT

OUT

OUT

OUT!

You open your eyes in the void

That's as far as your mind can get

You can still see outside of your head, of course.

You can see that it's dark.

That the night has fallen and only moonlight spills into your room.

That they have you hooked up to machines

Probably so you stay alive

And aren't a complete mess

You wish Mike wouldn't see you like this

But it's already too late

You stay in the void, pacing around

You know you're in a hospital gown

It makes you feel like you're twelve again

Lost and trapped and scared and so unknowing of everything

But you're not twelve anymore

You're fifteen

You're taller

You're curvier

Your hair is long and curly

And you know things now

Too many things

Too many painful, painful things

But also good things

Good things

So many good things

"MIKE," you scream, trying to not cry

Though you feel alone and not yourself

"MIKE," you scream again, "MIKE. MIKE. YOU SAID YOU'D COME BACK."

You take in a long, rattling breath.

"PLEASE. PLEASE, MIKE. PLEASE."

You fall to the wet floor, knowing that the monster is coming back into your head

Grabbing hold of you

Pulling you back in

But you scream anyway

You scream and scream and scream and scream

And scream and scream and scream and scream and scream and

scream and scream and scream

“MIKE. MIKE, PLEASE. PLEASE. MIKE. PLEASE.”

Come back, Eleven.

We have so much work to do.

“NO,” you scream, “NO. NO. NO. NO. NO. NO.”

He won’t come back, Eleven.

He won’t risk it.

Not for you.

“YES HE WILL. HE PROMISED. HE *PROMISED!*” you scream again,
“HE PROMISED! AND HE NEVER BREAKS HIS PROMISES! HE
NEVER DOES NEVER!”

He tried to die, Eleven.

He tried to abandon you.

That’s breaking the biggest promise of all.

“NO,” you scream again, “HE COULDN’T CONTROL IT. HE
COULDN’T. THAT WASN’T BREAKING A PROMISE. THAT WAS
BEING SICK. LEAVE HIM ALONE. LEAVE HIM ALONE. LEAVE HIM
ALONE. *LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM
ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM
ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE HIM
ALONE! LEAVE HIM ALONE!*”

You keep screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming

And it manages to keep the monster away

Just for now

So you keep screaming

Even though it makes you so

So

So very tired

And you just want to collapse

And be done with it all

But you promised Mike, too

You promised him

So you keep screaming

You just keep screaming

Because you have to be here when he gets back

You have to be here when he gets back

You have to –

He appears at the other end of the void.

You breathe with relief.

“Mike,” you whisper.

“Jane,” you can hear him whisper in response, and you run – sprint – through the void, running up to him as fast as you can.

You collapse into his arms.

You’re so tired.

So weak.

“Jane, pull me in again,” Mike begs.

“I’m – I’m so tired – Mike –“

“I know, but we’re going to fight him off.”

“But – “

“I’m not tired anymore. I’ve had a shitton of caffeine and carbs and sugar and I’m ready for this,” Mike promises, “Jane, we can do this. We can do this. *We* can do this.”

You let out another sob.

“Jane.”

You look up at him.

His eyes are filled with tears and so are yours.

“Just pull me into your head. I’ll find my way to you again.”

“But if I go back he’ll –“

“I won’t let him.”

“But –“

“*I won’t let him.* Take this risk. Take this risk for me, okay?”

You nod weakly.

“Okay. Okay. Pull me in, Jane. Please. Please –“

You nod again.

You grab his hand, concentrate –

And you’re both inside your head.

Except you’re surrounded by your memories again

And you don’t really know where he is

Not in all of this blackness

Not in this infinite space

“Mike? *MIKE!*” you scream again.

You shouldn't have done that, Jane.

You shouldn't have let him in here.

Because now I'll –

“You'll WHAT? YOU'LL WHAT? COME ON!”

You hear Mike.

His name escapes your lips like a breath of air.

“YOU COULDN'T FUCKING FINISH ME LAST TIME AND YOU'RE FUCKING DELUSIONAL IF YOU THINK THAT YOU CAN DEFEAT *BOTH* JANE AND ME.”

You whirl around on your heels, looking around wildly for Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

“BECAUSE FUCK, FUCK YOU, YOU STUPID MIND FLAYER. FUCK YOU. YOU KNOW WHAT?”

You feel tears spill over from your eyes as you hear him come closer.

“YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DEFEAT HER ALONE. BUT THAT WAS ONLY BECAUSE YOU KNEW SHE WAS IN PAIN.”

You smile weakly as you hear him talking.

Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

“YOU AMPLIFIED HER PAIN AND YOU MADE HER COLLAPSE ON HERSELF BUT YOU KNOW WHAT YOU CAN'T DO, YOU BASTARD?”

You feel the monster getting more and more angry.

You want to fight but you're too weak.

"YOU CAN'T BEAT HER WHEN SHE'S IN CONTROL. AND SOON, SHE WILL BE."

You are a fool, Michael –

"I MIGHT BE A FUCKING IDIOT BUT AT THE VERY LEAST I'M NOT AN IDIOT WHO TRIED TO CONVINCE A *JEWISH PERSON* TO COMMIT *FUCKING GENOCIDE*."

You look up as you see a figure fall from infinitely high above you.

"MIKE –"

He collapses to the grounds, but then struggles to his feet, running over you and away from a cloud of smoke following him.

"Jane – Jane –"

"Mike –"

"Jane, *Scream* –"

"Scream?"

"SCREAM WITH ME. NOW."

He runs up to you and grabs your hand, turning back towards the smoke as it comes up to you.

You're paralyzed with fear.

But Mike is screaming next to you.

So you scream with him.

And everything spills away.

All the darkness, for a moment, spills away.

“Okay,” he whispers, collapsing in what your mind is normally like,
“Okay.”

“But –“

“I *know* he’ll be back, okay? I know. But now I can help you.”

“Mike...”

“Listen to me. *Listen*. What is making you spiral? What thoughts? Tell me *exactly*. Tell me *exactly what you think* during your thought spirals.”

You swallow.

“But –“

“Jane, I’ve been going to therapy for shit like this for nearly a year. This is the best option we’ve got.”

You nod.

“Okay... um... that I’m a monster.”

“Alright.”

“And that I was a monster since I was conceived.”

“Okay.”

“And that they made me into more a monster.”

“Keep telling me...”

“And I never owned my own body or my mind.”

“Okay...”

“And they violated me and I’m broken forever...”

“Okay...”

“And then I got out and I hurt everyone around me.”

“Alright...”

“And I’m the reason all of this happened –“

“Jane –“

“And then I violated you, too –“

“Jane...”

“And now I’m the reason we’re all gonna d-die –“

“Okay. Okay. Jane, look at me.”

Your head snaps up and you meet his eyes.

“Take some deep breaths.”

You do so.

“Alright. Listen to me, okay? Just listen to me. Please.”

You nod.

“You’re not a monster at all. I know I’ve told you this a million times, and that it’s never stuck. But this is not about whether or not I’ve persuaded you. I need you to use me saying that as a stopper whenever you have these thoughts.”

“But –“

“Whenever you think you’re a monster, remind yourself that I don’t think you are. That no one else thinks you are. That we all think you’re a good, kind, *wonderful* person. Okay? That’s what you do first.”

You nod, crying.

“It’s so hard, th-though –“

“Then, when you’ve done that, focus on what you’re doing *right in that moment*, okay? Just focus on what you’re doing.”

“But... right now I’m not doing anything...”

“Yeah you are!” Mike smiles at you, “You’re talking to me.”

You smile weakly.

“Yeah... I guess...”

“Okay. So we’ve established you’re not a monster. Let’s stop some of those other thoughts, okay?”

You nod again.

“You’re right. You never owned your body or your mind, and they hurt you, a lot. And that’s awful. Awful awful awful awful,” Mike takes a deep breath and collects himself, “So awful that I’m even spiraling from it, you know?”

You nod, your whole body shaking.

“But you own yourself now. You are your own person, free to do whatever you want with yourself – they don’t own you anymore. And while that’s going to be hard to remember sometimes, you just need to *keep reminding yourself. You. Won.*”

You nod again.

“These are all really, really, *really* fucking temporary measures. You need an actual therapist for this. But, for now, just keep reminding yourself that it’s over. That you’re safe now. That I’ve got you, okay?” he whispers.

You throw your arms around him and hold him as tightly as you can.

“And finally,” he whispers in your ear, “You didn’t violate me, Jane.”

“But –“

“You didn’t, okay? Everything we’ve done together – every kiss, every night spent holding each other, every hug, every hand holding – look – all of that I did willingly. And you did willingly. And I’ve loved every second of it,” he takes a big, shaking breath, pulling

away to look at you, “We didn’t know this would happen. And I said it before, but I’ll say it again – even if we had, I would have kissed you anyway, s’ long as you were okay with it.”

You smile weakly.

“You would have?”

“Abso – fucking – lutely I would have. I love you, Jane Hopper, and you can’t ever make me stop. Even if you don’t want to be with me anymore, and we break up – I’ll respect that, and we’ll go our separate ways, and I’ll always respect your wishes, but I’ll always love you.”

You run up to him and kiss him.

Kissing him in your head is weird.

Because he’s there with you.

But it’s not outside of your brain.

So instead of it being whatever you want it to be.

It’s filled with every single emotion you feel towards Mike Levinson.

And it’s overwhelming.

“Finally,” Mike says, and he’s breathless now, he can barely get the words out.

“Finally... you might have broken open the gate, and brought the monster here, but that wasn’t your fault, Jane,” Mike whispers, “It wasn’t your fault. It was there fault. They pushed you, and they made you do things that you didn’t want to do, and it wasn’t your fault, okay? It’s not your fault. And you’ve been doing everything you can to set it right, and you’ll *keep* doing everything you can, when you don’t even have to, because again, it’s *not your fault*.”

You sniffle.

“So you just have to keep telling yourself all of this,” Mike begs, “You

just have to. Keep repeating what I say in your head. Because your head is just repeating bad things to you, right? So why can't you play at its own game?"

You nod as much as you can, though you're so, so so very tired –

And you can feel the smoke surrounding you both again –

You're a Monster

Monster

Monster

Monster

Mike is going to die

Mike is going to die for you

Mike is going to die

And it's going to be all your fault

All your fault

All your fault

You don't want him to die

You don't want him to die

You don't want him to die

So then don't let him die

Don't let him die

Don't let him die

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD," you scream at the monster.

But Eleven, how can you remove me when I am a part of you –

“GET. OUT. OF. MY. HEAD. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT!”

You keep screaming it over and over and over again, moving around in circles, screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming.

I cannot be defeated so easily –

GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT

“Get OUT OF HER YOU BASTARD! YOU SICK SICK SICK BASTARD!” Mike screams with you, wandering around in your head and screaming at the top of his lungs, “GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!”

“STOP VIOLATING HER! LET HER GO! LET HER GO! LET HER GO!”

You scream with him, but you’re too tired to put as much energy into it as he is, and everything is just exhausting and you just want to collapse –

“Jane I can’t do this without you. You’re stronger than me –“

“No I’m not –“

“Yes you are!!! With these stupid powers you are!!!! Force him out! Force him out *now!*” Mike begs.

You stare at him and start sobbing.

“I can’t stop remembering –“

Mike grabs you by the shoulders and looks at you with tears running down his face.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Wha –“

“Tell me what happened.”

“But –“

“I saw it. I know I saw it. And I know you don’t want to talk about it. But... for me... the only way I could get myself to stop talking about memories that were... not nearly as bad but still bad... was to acknowledge that they happened. Out loud. To another person. So in lieu of it being out loud, *tell me in here*. Please, Jane. *Please*.”

You nod.

You’re sobbing.

He’s sobbing too.

Come now, Eleven, you’ll never be able to say these words –

“My whole life they kept... m-m-m-making me...”

“I’m sorry for pushing you, you should be able to do this in your own time, but we don’t *have time* –“

“They made me und-d-dress in front of them and they looked at m-m-me –“

“I’m so sorry Jane –“

You’ll never be able to stop thinking about this, Eleven...

“And sometimes they’d t-t-t-ouch me places –“

“Jane, that’s awful.”

YOU WILL NEVER ESCAPE ME, ELEVEN –

“And then... Papa... Papa...”

“I’m sorry, Jane, I’m sorry, I wish you didn’t have to do this –“

“Papa r-r-raped me...”

“How do you feel about it?”

“What?”

“How do you feel about all of this, Jane? Tell me. Tell me, *please*.”

You want to die.

Maybe you should say that.

ELEVEN, YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO STOP THINKING ABOUT IT

—

“No, she won’t, and that is awful, but SHE WILL BE ABLE TO SURVIVE, YOU BASTARD, NOW SHUT UP,” Mike screams.

“I want to die, Mike,” you whisper.

Mike cries with you.

“I know the feeling.”

“I’d rather be dead than l-l-live in this body —“

“Hey, you wanna know something?”

You shrug.

“Your body changes its cells all the time. They’re constantly dying and replacing themselves.”

“Okay...”

“And your mind is constantly changing as you grow up and become a new person and experience new things, right?”

“Yeah...”

“So you’re already *mostly* not who you were when that happened to you.”

“I... guess that’s true...”

“So you don’t need to die. You just need to wait. And eventually, it won’t hurt as much.”

Ah, but it will *always* hurt —“

“Yeah, dick, it’ll always hurt,” Mike shouts back at the monster, “But eventually, it *will* be bearable. And I, and all her other friends, will help *make* it bearable. And you don’t have to die, Jane. You don’t have to die for the pain to go away. You’re not a monster, so you don’t deserve to die, and you don’t have to for this to end. I promise. I promise. I promise. I promise.”

You keep sobbing.

“How else do you feel about it?”

“Like... something was taken fr-fr-from m-m-m-m-me –“

“Nothing was taken from you.”

“What?”

“I don’t know exactly what you’re talking about, but if you’re talking about virginity –“

“Yeah –“

“Then that wasn’t taken away from you. It’s about the first time you have sex, and you didn’t have sex. Sex and rape aren’t the same thing.”

“Something was taken from me, Mike. Something was taken from me!” you scream, “You can’t – you can’t make that feeling go away –“

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry –“

He’ll never be able to calm you down, Jane. He’s just another one of those men trying to –

“WOULD YOU SHUT UP?” Mike screams.

You let out a weak laugh.

Mike’s head snaps back to look at you with wide eyes.

“Jane –“

You breathe a little quicker.

“Okay. So something was taken from you. I’m sorry I talked over you. I shouldn’t have done that.”

You nod.

“Thank you, Mike.”

“I’m sorry something was taken from you.”

“I’ll never get that back.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I hate it. I hate it. I hate it –“

“Is there *any* way for you to think about this that’ll help?”

“I d-d-d-don’t know –“

“Well, it’s over. And you’ll never have to see that man again.”

AH, but he might still be out there –

“And we’re not going to fucking go looking for him *WOULD YOU JUST FUCK OFF ALREADY?!*” Mike screams again, and as dark smoke starts to trail in around you both he screams and screams and screams, making it dissipate.

“Okay, hopefully that smug douchebag will shut the fuck up,” Mike says, holding his face in his hands, “Let me try something else.”

“Okay...”

“Yes. You had that taken away from you.”

You nod, sobbing more.

“You’ve also had your childhood taken away from you. Your family taken away from you. Your decisions taken away from you.”

“*How is this s-s-s-s-supposed to help???*”

“Think about it, Jane. You’ve had some really amazingly fun and

beautiful years since you've gotten out – with Hop, with me, with the whole party. Having fun playing Dungeons and Dragons together... putting together puzzles... learning... reading so many books... riding bikes through town and exploring the woods together..."

"Y... yeah..."

"That's not a perfect childhood. That doesn't even begin to make up for the lost years. But wasn't it still nice? Still good? Still healing?"

You nod.

"And you have a family now. Me, and Will and Lucas and Dustin and Max and Hopper and Mrs. Byers and Mom and Bubbe and Zayde and Nancy and Steve and Jonathan. You have all of us."

You nod rapidly.

"And you didn't have us your whole life but you have us now – doesn't that help?"

"It helps a lot," you whisper.

You remember how everyone's words helped you escape.

Just for a moment.

So you could get Mike.

"And look – you make all sorts of decisions on your own now. What classes you take, what you do from day to day, what you eat, even – heck – one day – what you'll do with the rest of your life. Doesn't making all of those decisions make you feel better? Make you feel happy and like you're going to be glad to wake up the next day?"

You nod, sniffing.

"That control you've gotten back is important, Jane."

You'll never have control, Eleven, that's the illusion –

"You fucker didn't I tell you to *stay away*?" Mike roars, "Now, Jane..."

look. One day, you'll be able to consider your body and your sexuality on your own terms. Whether that means never doing anything like that, or whatever you might decide. That's up to *you*. And whatever you decide, it'll be your decision, and it'll still be fulfilling, and wonderful, whether it's nothing, whether it's something, whether it's... anything. Okay? And he can't take that away from you. He *can't*."

You sniffle heavily.

"B-but –"

"Jane, that's the thing about it being *your choice*. You'll only choose it – if you choose it at all – because you're *ready*. Which means it'll still be meaningful. Does that make sense?"

You nod weakly.

"And I promise, you'll have everyone helping you, the whole way, to come to terms with what's happened to you. I *promise*."

You throw your arms around him in a hug again, holding onto him tightly.

"I feel... dirty, Mike. Tainted. Ruined. Bad –"

"Jane, you're not any of those things," Mike whispers, "You're not. You're *not*. I promise. You were hurt, and that sucks, but you're not ruined for it. You're strong. You're a survivor. And that's beautiful, and good, and you're still perfect in every single way."

"No I'm n-not –"

"Well, no one's perfect. But you're perfect to me."

You keep sobbing heavily.

You still think about the memories. They still haunt in a corner of your mind.

But the memories have stopped spinning around your head.

Now you think mainly of him.

No, Eleven, no, you see, you are trapped –

“GO AWAY,” you scream, whirling on your heels to face the clouds of smoke, “GO AWAY. GO AWAY. GO AWAY. GO AWAY.”

YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME –

“YES I CAN. GO AWAY. GO AWAY. GO AWAY. GO AWAY.”

“Jane you’re going to have to use your powers,” Mike whispers, “I don’t think you can just think him out –“

“My powers *are* thinking,” you snap, tears still streaming down your cheeks.

“I know, but like... channeling the energy. You know what I mean. Because our brains do the same thing now,” Mike begs, “You can’t just... use your new thoughts to make him go away. Because I probably could have done that on my own then. But...”

“Okay,” you sigh, “Okay... I... I know what you mean.”

And you’re weak now, Eleven.

You’re too weak to use your powers.

Much much much too weak.

I’ve weakened you, Eleven, and eventually I’ll trap you again –

“MY NAME IS *JANE!*” you scream at the top of your lungs, and you hold up your hand.

“I want you to find something from your life. Something that angers you.”

The memory starts playing in your head. It goes in the periphery of your vision. Mike jumps back in shock, watching it with wide eyes.

The other memories come back with that one, but they’re under your control.

Being thrown into closets.

Your mama being shocked into catatonia.

The men watching you.

And touching you.

And raping you.

And you killing people.

And the gate opening.

And the monster coming out.

And you losing your friends in the Lab and being alone.

And Barb dying in the Upside Down.

And you having to defeat the Demogorgon.

And Papa almost taking you away again.

And you living alone in the cabin for such a long time.

And all those people attacking Mike.

And Mike trying to kill himself.

And Mike being sick with his powers.

The bacteria in your body that you had no say over.

The tattoos on Bubbe's arm.

Dustin and Hopper coughing up the black gunk.

Everything.

Awful.

Everything.

Awful.

You hold up your hand to the monster and you glare while Mike watches with his eyes wide.

“Now channel it.”

You channel it.

You focus your fury.

Your anger.

Your hate.

Your suffering.

Your pain.

Everything.

Everything awful.

The monster starts to fall back.

YOU CANNOT D E F E A T ME E L E V E N –

“MY. NAME. IS. JANE,” you scream again, and you focus harder.

YOU CAN’T –

“MY NAME IS JANE.”

YOU CAN’T –

“MY NAME IS JANE.”

YOU CAN’T –

“MY NAME IS JANE.”

YOU CAN’T –

“MY NAME IS JANE.”

You scream, as the effort overtakes your already tired and weak mind, as everything inside of you feels like it’s exploding –

The memories grow larger around you, almost like they’re spinning again, but they’re spinning around you *and* Mike –

They overwhelm you with thoughts and sounds and smells like you’re back there again –

You scream and scream and scream and scream and scream –

“Dig Deeper. Your whole life you’ve been lied to. Imprisoned. The bad men took away your home –“

“Jane!” Mike screams.

“Your mother –“

“JANE!”

YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME –

“They took *everything* from you –“

“JANE”

“They STOLE YOUR LIFE, JANE –“

“JANE, STOP –“

The monster expands around you, smoke surrounding you.

“JANE STOP IT –“

You keep screaming.

“NO!”

Mike tackles you to the ground.

The monster stops surrounding, and falls back.

See, Eleven?

You can't –

“SHUT UP!” you scream again, but you're so tired it's hard to even get the words out.

“JANE, YOU CAN'T JUST USE YOUR ANGER,” Mike screams.

You turn to him, screaming over the memories that are still playing.

“BUT THAT'S HOW –“

“I DON'T CARE WHAT KALI SAID. I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU'VE USED IN THE PAST. JANE, YOU HAVE TO USE THE GOOD AND THE BAD.”

“BUT –“

“YOUR ANGER IS KILLING YOU. IT WAS MAKING HIM STRONGER. IT'S WHAT HE'S USING TO HOLD ONTO YOUR BRAIN –“

Don't listen to him, Eleven

Keep using your anger

You heard me scream –

You look at Mike with wide eyes.

“But –“

“He's in your head. This isn't like last time. You can't just use your powers and be done with it. You also have to fight the memories. Jane, listen to me. Just try it,” Mike begs, “Just try it.”

You turn back to the Mind Flayer.

“Just think of good things as well as the bad.”

Playing with Kali in the Rainbow Room.

Sitting with Mike in his basement.

Riding with Mike on his bike and talking.

Staying with Hopper and playing games together.

Learning to read and write and do math with Hopper.

Finding Kali and laughing together on the roof.

ELEVEN –

You start to scream again as more memories surround you three.

“Keep going! Jane! Keep channeling it! Channel the good! The good and the bad!”

Seeing Mike again

Kissing Mike in his room

Spending time with Mike in the cabin

Going to the Snow Ball

Reading with Mike

Playing games with your friends

Adopting the birds with Hopper

“REMEMBER HOW IT MAKES YOU FEEL! REMEMBER HOW YOU FELT HAPPY AND SAFE AND HUMAN –“

ELE VEN YOU CANN OT D E FEAT M E

Training the birds

Feeling their soft feathers

“REMEMBER IT ALL, JANE. GOOD AND BAD AND IN BETWEEN. I BELIEVE IN YOU. YOU CAN DO IT.”

Kissing Mike in the warm sun

Hugging Dustin

High fiving-Lucas

Arm-wrestling Max

Listening to music with Will

Y O U W I L L P E R I S H J A N E

“SHUT UP YOU FUCKER –“

Learning guitar from Jonathan

Eating cotton candy with Steve

Putting on makeup with Nancy

Talking with Kali

Y O U W I L L N O T W I N

Putting together puzzles with Hopper

Shopping for clothes with Mrs. Byers

Cooking with Mike’s Mom

Talking about everything with Bubbe

Laughing about everything with Zayde

I W I L L C O M E B A C K F O R Y O U A L L

“LIKE HELL YOU WILL YOU BASTARD –“

You channel it all

The anger

The fear

The hatred

The suffering

The pain

The fury

But also the good

The joy

The love

The happiness

The amusement

The kindness

The softness

N O N O N O N O N O N O -

“AA

–“ you scream.

Your entire mind starts to glow.

Hot

And red

Mike cries out in pain and holds himself in a ball.

The monster starts to ebb back.

You keep screaming.

The monster keeps screaming.

Mike keeps screaming.

“JANE, YOU CAN DO THIS –“

NO NO N O NO NO –

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA –“

You have been hurt before

In so many worse ways

A stupid shadow demon isn't going to beat you

He isn't

He isn't

He isn't

HE ISN'T

You scream and scream and scream and scream

Until a blinding flash of orange fills your whole mind

And you see again in the real world

You cough violently

Cough

Cough

Cough

Cough

And a cloud of smoke comes out of your ears and nose and eyes and mouth

Until it's gone up, up, up

Out into the sky.

You sit up, panting, holding your mouth in your hands.

You vomit over the side of the bed.

Mike gets up weakly from a kiddie pool of water, blood all over his mouth and dripping from his ears and dark lines over his eyes which are bloodshot. Black soot and grime is all over the front of his clothes and mouth, too.

“Jane –“

“Mike –“

You run to him and collapse into his arms.

He holds you up, kissing you over and over and over again on your forehead.

“I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud of you. I’m so –“

“He’s still here –“

“Jane we don’t have to worry about that right now –“

“He’s still here, Mike, he’s still here, I knew what he was planning when he was in my head, I knew, I knew –“

“What was he planning?”

“He’s learned everything about our world. He’s spent two years *learning about us* from inside Hopper and Dustin. And he built up – he can’t be killed by heat – not anymore –“

“Okay –“

“If he couldn’t take me out he was going to take out the whole party because he knows without them I’m –“

“You’re just as strong without them –“

“But he’s infected *everyone!* And he’s still going to try and –“

Mike looks at you with wide eyes and you both sprint out of the room out into the waiting room.

Everyone is passed out on the floor.

“NO –“

Mike runs up to Dustin’s neck and holds his fingers there.

“They’re still alive –“

“But –“

“We’re going to go in and get him out like we got him out of you,” Mike says, looking at you seriously.

“I’m too –“

“Together. We’re doing it together.”

You run up to him and hold his hand tightly.

“But he’s in you, too –“

“Fuck no he’s not. I was in your mind when you banished him. Any traces of him that got in got out of me too. I know ‘cause I coughed up all that crap with you.”

You look at him and nod.

“Okay.”

“Okay. Let’s do this.”

You lean in and kiss him.

You still have so much to figure out.

But you have to save them first.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay so important fact: I hate that stupid thing that's like "I can't wait for my whole body to be replaced every seven years so that I will no longer be the person you touched" because for fuck's sake you don't

replace every cell in your body your brain cells are the same from birth to death (mostly)

But A) mike doesn't know that and B) if it helps jane, then fine. FINeEEEEEE

Right onto more important things: I'm sorry this update took so long. Full disclosure, I have the flu, and I'm still not over it. So idk when I'll finally get out the next chapter. But I'm working on it, I swear, and I thank you all for your many wonderful comments and your patience

As for the ending there - my fiance had a very important point about Jane using her anger to defeat the MF/close the gate at the end of s2 and that was "this is a path to the dark side." So, you know, trying to fucking address that little problem. Using only anger is not really a healthy coping mechanism for anything.

ALSO, okay, I'm sorry, but burning out the thing??? In s2??? Makes little sense???? But I'll go along with it. However, the thing has had two years and two summers in our world now. It's adapted to heat

I'm glad you all liked the last chapter - honestly I think it's going to be one of my favorite things I've ever written for, like, ever. I'm proud of my visuals and atmosphere and I'm glad you all agreed!!!

Thank you all for your wonderful comments. Please leave one here, and I'll write the next one as soon as I can!!! <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

31. Step Three

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning For: Underage Drinking, Car Accident, Allusions to Childhood Sexual Assault, War Imagery, discussions of teenage sexuality

Also, this chapter will go BETWEEN Mike & Jane's POVs, so be sure to notice when I add a name line for that POV switch.

S E P T E M B E R 1 0 1 9 8 6

M I K E L E V I N S O N

You still have chocolate and spaghetti from earlier.

Jane looks sick to her stomach, but you're going to force feed her the food if you have to.

"Mike, I –"

"Look, Jane, I love you, and I wish I didn't have to force you to get moving here, and I wish that I could do this on my own, but the simple truth is I *can't* do this on my own. I just can't. I need your help, because I'm new to this whole power thing, and my powers are fucking time based, so I don't think I can really force a Mind Flayer out of a space anyway. Out of a time maybe, but I think that's Advanced Psychic and I'm still in Psychic One-Oh-One. So you need to get your energy up, get your brain going, and go in and out of our friend's heads and defeat that mother fucker," you ramble, "Do you understand? *Do you understand?*"

"Yes," Jane whispers, "I have an idea."

"Okay?"

"My powers are always easier to use when I drink."

"I... um..."

“I don’t think we have many more options.”

You run your hands through your hair and pace around the room as everyone lies in front of you.

You can’t look at Bubbe and Zayde.

It’ll make you cry too much.

Well, you can’t look at any of them.

But.

Yeah.

“I don’t know where to get alcohol –“

“You can drive.”

“I am not twenty-one.”

“Hopper has vodka in our fridge,” Jane whispers, handing you keys, “I’ve been avoiding it.”

You swallow.

“I don’t want to make you start –“

“It’s okay, Mike. We can worry about that later.”

You nod.

You start to run out of the room and Jane follows you.

“You should watch them –“

“I don’t want to be alone –“

You nod.

She grabs your hand and you both run out to the car, you starting the ignition and feeling your heart pound loudly in your throat.

You don't know how much time they have.

You only know you have to save them.

So you drive faster than you have before.

"Mike, be careful –"

"It's two AM –"

"I know, but..."

You sigh and slow down.

You keep driving, though, through the town, your heart in your ears and your throat and your head feeling a little woozy.

"Mike –"

"What, I'm focusing."

"Um..."

"What? Jane, please –"

"Don't... look behind you."

"Okay?"

"Just drive faster."

"Okay..."

You put the pedal down and keep going, driving through and entering the woods.

"What is it?" you ask as you speed, your heart in your throat, pounding much much much too fast now.

"He's following us."

"SHIT –"

You go faster, until you finally reach the cabin, parking and running inside with Jane.

You take a second to look behind you.

A large cloud of smoke is approaching.

“FUCK, FUCK, FUCK –“

Jane runs inside, digging into the fridge. Her birds scream loudly.

“I need to feed them –“

“Jane *no* – “

“GO START THE CAR AGAIN –“

“JANE –“

“I HAVE TO –“

“I’LL DO IT, YOU STOP HIM –“

The cloud of smoke enters the cabin’s doorway and Jane whirls around on her heels, holding up her hands and stopping the monster in its tracks, holding it back. You run to the birds and add more food to the bowl and fresh water while she holds it.

“Mike I can’t let go or –“

You scream in frustration, grab her arm, and focus.

You both land in the past, outside the cabin.

The smoke monster being held by Jane from the past in the doorway.

You collapse into the car and start it as Jane gets into the front seat, looking at you in shock.

“Did you just –“

“We can worry about it later –“

“I think you just moved on to Psychic One-Oh-Two –“

“Oh my God –“

“DRIVE –“

You had caught up to when you disappeared.

The monster was turning around to follow you again.

You take off, driving through the woods as fast as you can, trying to dodge trees as the smoke gains on you.

Jane turns around and holds up her hands, pushing back on the monster as it starts to fall behind.

“DRIVE DRIVE DRIVE DRIVE –“

“I’M GOING I’M GOING I’M GOING I’M GOING –“

You pull back out onto the roads when the monster hits the back of the car.

Jane screams.

You drive faster.

It hits the side of the car, making it tip.

You keep driving

Jane screams more

Go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go –

The Mind Flayer grabs the car and drops it

Jane screams

You scream

You keep driving

You just want to be back at the lab

You drive as fast as you can –

“MIKE –“

WHAM

You run into another car going the other way

You spin out onto the shoulder

You scream as airbags run into your mouth and chest

You grab onto Jane's arm as the car flips over onto its back

You hang from midair, panting, trying to gain your balance.

Everything's spinning

You can see something on fire –

Fire –

Car –

Gasoline –

You unbuckle and fall to the floor, crawling around and going to the other side.

Jane's already out, and you grab her arm and limp away, adrenaline still pumping through you –

She's covered in blood and you think she hit her head –

Her side didn't have an airbag –

You're glad your car is new –

Everything *hurts* –

You know something's broken –

You have whiplash –

But you have to run –

You hear something explode behind you –

You hear the Monster scream at the heat and the fire –

You keep going –

“Mike I can’t – “

“We’re almost there –“

“Mike my leg –“

Your ribs hurt like hell

But you help Jane limp forward.

“I need help,” she whimpers.

“I know, I know – “

“I can’t do this now –“

“We *have to* –“

“Well I can’t *drink* so that’s all for *nothing* –“

“How’s your head?”

You take the time to look at her and see she’s bleeding from her hairline.

You rip off the edge of your shirt and wrap it around her head to stop the bleeding.

“We should c-c-call –“

“We don’t have *time* –“

Jane starts sobbing and you keep limping forward until you reach the

lab, running back up to the room where everyone else is.

They're all still passed out.

"Fuck, I was hoping that got rid of him from everyone," you mutter.

Jane sits on the ground, holding her face in her hands.

"I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't –"

You give her spaghetti and chocolate and coffee and wrap up her head with more bandages as she eats and cries.

You take the vodka and you chug it even though you know it's an awful idea.

And it burns down your throat and everything hurts

But you eat, too, and you let your brain feel... weird

So weird

So very, very, very weird

"Mike?"

You look at her.

"Jane?"

"I love you."

"I love you," you whisper back.

"I'm sorry I made us go for this. And I'm not even going to drink it."

You sit down next to her.

"Because of your head wound?"

"Yeah."

"I understand. Do you want to go in the pool?"

“But you – “

“You need it more than me.”

She shakes her head.

“No. I still have adrenaline.”

“Okay.”

“Who are we going to first?”

“Dustin. He’s been out longer and he’s younger than Hop,” you say firmly.

“Agreed,” Jane whispers. She grabs your hand.

You squeeze hers.

“Ready?”

“No,” Jane mumbles, “But I have to be.”

You kiss her.

She holds you tightly.

And you both close your eyes.

Void.

You see Jane standing next to you in the infinite black and water.

She looks so tired.

You’re also this tired.

You both walk together through the void towards a figure of Dustin, lying down, passed out on a bed.

She touches his head.

You hold onto her hand.

You're pulled into his head.

It's black like Jane's was.

But there isn't a spiral.

There's just Dustin, trapped by smoke, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"HELP, HELP, HELP, HELP, SHIT, SHIT, SHIT, SHIT –"

"DUSTIN!" you scream, running up to him.

"M – Mike?" he gasps, "Mike? *Jane*?"

"We're here, we're here to get rid of it."

"But –"

"Everyone's passed out, man," you whisper, "Everyone –"

"Weak little Dustin, needing his stronger friends to help him –"

"You really need to get a new MO, dude," you shout.

Jane laughs weakly.

"You know what to do," you whisper.

She nods.

"You're too weak, Eleven –"

Jane holds up her hand.

She looks like she's going to fall over.

You hold her up.

She keeps focusing.

You watch her as she glares at the thing holding Dustin.

“What... happened to you two?”

“They hurt themselves to try and save you –“

“Oh for fucks sake,” you shout at the Mind Flayer, “Would you just shut up? No one cares what you think.”

“What happened?” Dustin asks.

“We got into a car accident. Long story,” you mutter as Jane keeps holding up her hand, focusing and concentrating.

The Mind Flayer starts to dissipate.

It screams.

Dustin screams.

You scream.

Jane screams.

Flash of orange.

And then it's gone.

Dustin collapses as his head starts to look normal – memories floating around rapidly and swirling around with his thoughts.

Dustin gasps in shock.

You and Jane blink out.

You wake up, coughing and spluttering, both of you bleeding from your nostrils.

“Guys –“

“Dustin, we'd love to chat, but we have the entire rest of the party to save,” you say weakly.

“But you guys are losing way too much blood –“

“Probably,” Jane sighs.

“This is insane –“

“At *least* let us save Hop –“

Dustin groans loudly as you both close your eyes.

Void.

Jane runs now, running up to Hopper and putting her hand on his head. You follow her, grabbing onto her wrist as you’re suddenly inside blackness again.

Everything is spinning.

Spinning so

So

So

So much

You can’t make out anything except for Jane standing with you in the center of the spirals

Spirals

Plural

This is going to be harder than you thought

J A N E H O P P E R

You can’t get your bearings

All of you hurts

Your leg hurts your chest hurts your head hurts and your brain still hurts

You just want to sleep

But you have to save everyone first

You have to

You have to save Hop

But his brain is more than just a spiral

It's about ten different spirals all going around you and Mike as you stand amongst them

Spirals and smoke and screams and you can see memories swirling around in those spirals

Memories

So many memories

You see flashes of men being killed with bullets

Falling to the ground

Explosions and fire and death and children looking like walking corpses

You scream

You can see another memory

Of a little girl with no hair

Dying

You scream more

You see Hopper fighting with a woman

You see him drinking

You see him passed out with a note next to him and waking up, looking disappointed

You see him looking for Will

You see him in the Lab. The old Lab.

You see him telling Papa where you are

You see him going into the vine tunnels

You see him not knowing where you are

You see him watching you close the gate

You see him picking you up from Mike's unconscious body

You see him watching you break down

You see him watching you lying there, catatonic

All these memories swirl and swirl and swirl around

So many of him in war

So many of him losing his daughter

So many of him losing you

And you fall to the floor, screaming.

It hurts too much to see

It hurts too much

“Jane –“

“Mike –“

“We have to find Hopper – “

“How can we find him in this?” you sob, “Does he even still *exist* in all this?”

“Yes, yes he does, Jane, we’ll find him, *we’ll find him* –“

You sob and sob and sob and sob

“Is this... what *my* head... will –“

“Don’t think about that right now,” Mike helps you up, “Find him.”

You focus.

You start running.

You have to save him

You have to save him

You have to save him

You have to save him

You have to save him

You can’t bear this

You can’t

Mike follows you.

You can start to hear the Mind Flayer now.

“You are an awful father. An awful black hole. A terrible human being who –”

“SHUT UP,” you scream, “SHUT UP.”

You run towards the Mind Flayer before he can say anything more.

“JUST SHUT UP –“

“Why are you trying to save him, Jane?”

“SHUT UP –“

“He sold you out.”

“SHUT UP!”

“He revealed where you were.”

“SHUT UP!”

“He’s the reason you were in pain for such a long, long time –“

“SHUT UP!”

“You owe him nothing –“

“SHUT UP!” You hold your hand up and focus again.

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!”

“He’s right.”

You hear a small voice.

D –

Hopper.

“No, he’s not,” you shout.

“Kid, you don’t have to do this. It’s... it’s alright. It’s alright.”

“No, I do have to do this. I do.”

“But –“

“I forgive you!” you scream, as you continue to focus.

You do.

You really, really do.

“Kid –“

“I FORGIVE YOU NOW SHUT UP –“

You focus

Mike watches, his eyes wide, as the swirling starts to slow down.

You keep focusing

As hard as you can

Focus

Focus

“Why do you forgive him, Jane?”

“I DON’T NEED TO TELL YOU, SHUT UP –“

“You have no reason to forgive him –“

“I DON’T NEED TO EXPLAIN IT TO YOU, SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP –“

You don’t need to explain that you understand why he did it

That you know he’s sorry

That all these years together have more than made up for it

That you’re okay now

Well

You’re going to be okay

And that he and Mike have made you feel more safe and loved than anyone ever has

“He hurt you, Jane, just like all the rest –“

“NO, NOT LIKE THEM, SHUT UP!” you scream

And you scream

And you focus

And you focus

“Jane...”

“YOU SHUT UP TOO,” you scream at D – Hopper.

“Jane, you need to save your energy, you’re a wreck, you –“

“JUST SHUT UP, DAD, JUST SHUT UP,” you scream without thinking.

Mike looks at you in shock.

The figure of Hopper obscured by shadows looks at you in shock.

But you keep focusing.

“I suppose it’s fitting you call him that, given what your first Papa did to you,” the Mind Flayer hisses.

“Papa is evil,” you snarl, still holding up your hand, “But that doesn’t mean all dads are evil.”

“Jane –“ Mike whispers.

“Zayde is a good person. Lucas’ dad is a good person. And Hopper is a good person,” you continue, snarling.

“But he sold you out –“

“HE WAS SCARED. HE WAS SCARED AND TRAPPED AND MADE A MISTAKE. I’VE DONE THAT A MILLION TIMES,” you scream, “EVERYONE HAS.”

“Well, you know how I feel about humans –“

“I DON’T CARE, YOU’RE *WRONG!*” you scream.

“I’m bored of this argument, you’re wrong you dumb fuckwad,” Mike agrees.

“Jane, you shouldn’t forgive me...”

“WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, DAD, *SHUT UP!*” you scream.

And you focus.

And you focus

And the stupid Mind Flayer keeps trying to knock you back

But you focus

And you glare

And eventually the spirals stop around you

And they start to dissipate

Until the memories start to calm

And you scream and scream and scream and scream and scream

Until it's gone.

A brilliant flash of orange.

And it's gone again.

Everything *burns*.

You blink out and open your eyes in the lab.

You look over at Dad as he starts to sit up, holding his face in his hands and groaning.

You run over to him and hug him.

"I'm sorry, kid, I'm sorry, I'm so so so so sorry –"

"Dad," you whisper, "I forgive you, I know you know it was a mistake, I forgive you, I –"

"Jane."

You look over at Mike.

"He doesn't know," Mike whispers.

"Doesn't know –"

“What happened to you,” Mike says, tears in his eyes, “Dustin doesn’t either.”

“Oh,” you mutter.

Your tongue feels too big in your mouth.

You don’t think you can say it.

You don’t think you can say anything.

“We don’t have time,” you mutter quietly, “Let’s go –“

“The others haven’t been out as long,” Mike whispers, “We have time.”

“No, we don’t. Let’s go. Bubbe next.”

“Jane, you have to tell them.”

“No, I don’t.”

Mike drops it, looking sad.

“Kid, you need to rest. Write it down for me,” Dad begs.

You swallow.

He’s right.

You’re so tired you feel you could pass out.

Or was that the head wound?

You walk over to a piece of paper and scribble it down, before handing it to Dad, not looking at him.

He reads it, wordlessly, before dropping it on the floor.

“Jane?”

You look at him, tears streaming down your face.

“Can I hug you?”

You nod.

You run forward.

He hugs you tightly.

You hug him back.

You sob heavily into his chest, wishing that everything was different.

“I’m so, so, so sorry Jane. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

You hear Mike whispering to Dustin what happened as Dustin screams in horror.

“Jane, you need to rest. You’ve been through a lot and –“

“No,” you mumble, “I’m the only one who can save them.”

Hopper suddenly looks at you seriously.

“Are you... bleeding... from your head?”

“We... may or may not have crashed the car,” Mike admits, grimacing.

“You *what*?”

“Jane and I were really weak after getting that thing out of her brain,” Mike explains tiredly, “And we didn’t think we could rescue you guys.”

“You drove to the cabin to get my liquor, didn’t you.”

“Yeah. And the thing started to chase us.”

“Jesus Christ –“

“Jane held him back for us to get the alcohol but then we were driving back and it kept running into the car to try and take us down

and so I ran into another car head on,” Mike whispers, his voice trembling, “And we got out but the cars exploded.”

“FUCKING SHIT –“

You start sobbing.

It’s all so much.

You can’t process it.

It’s too much.

Too much.

Too much.

“Okay, okay. You kids can’t keep going in and out. You can’t.”

“But the rest of them –“

“There has to be another way –“

“The heat won’t work anymore,” you mumble.

“Well shit.”

“They haven’t been infected for very long though, right?” Dustin asks, his brow furrowed in concentration, “They didn’t pass out with me and Hop –“

“From what I remember... I think he hadn’t really been infecting them, it was a... he couldn’t defeat me after all... thing,” you admit.

“Maybe you can get it out just out here?” Dustin offers.

“It’s worth trying,” Mike agrees quietly.

“I’m... so tired though,” you whisper.

“I know, Jane, I know, and you deserve rest, but...” Mike is crying, “I can’t... we can’t lose them...”

“No,” you agree softly, “We can’t.

“You might as well try, kid,” Dad whispers.

He looks like he’s trying ridiculously hard not to cry.

You look away.

You feel like you might cry yourself.

You walk up to Bubbe and put your hand on hers.

You focus.

You find the smoky thing inside of her.

You gasp quietly.

You focus more.

But nothing seems to happen.

Mike swears quietly as you open your eyes with tears in them.

“I c-c-can’t –“

“Yes you can, Jane.”

You look at Dad.

“But –“

“I watched you, when you were only thirteen years old, close that gate. I watched you close that massive thing and stop that monster while you did it. You’re tired, and you’re shaken up, and you’re dealing with traumatic memories on top of that, but you *can do this*. I know you can. You’ve only gotten stronger since then. And you were shaken up, and traumatized, and tired back then. You can do this. I promise. You can do this,” Dad whispers.

“Oh... okay...” you mumble.

Mike squeezes your hand tightly.

You feel arms around you – Dustin has gotten up, and is hugging you.

You focus.

You keep watching Bubbe.

You close your eyes.

You're in the void now.

But you walk over to Bubbe.

And you just hold her hand.

You feel something else in the void –

Mike is there –

Holding your hand too –

You take another deep breath –

And you focus –

Focus –

Focus –

Focus –

It burns –

It burns –

It burns –

It's all too much –

But you have to save her –

You *have to* –

Focus –

Focus –

Focus –

And the smoke comes out.

You open your eye in shock as it just dissipates into the air.

Dustin shouts loudly behind you.

You look around and watch as he grabs a jar and captures the smoke with it.

“Where the hell –“ Mike shouts.

“Doc’s just gonna have to get new tongue depressors,” Dustin says seriously, pointing to a pile of popsicle stick things on the floor.

Bubbe is sitting up, holding her head in her hands and groaning.

“Okay but the moment you open that thing again it’s going to come out,” Hop shouts, “We need... *ten more containers* –“

Dustin leaves the room in a sprint and Mike follows him, leaving you and Hop alone.

He doesn’t say anything, just looks at you with a torn face.

“Jane...”

“I don’t wanna talk about it right now,” you mutter quietly.

“Alright...”

He and Bubbe share worried glances.

“Zeisele, are you sure –“

“Yes, I’m sure,” you mutter.

Eventually Dustin and Mike run back in, dump four more glass jars, and then run back out again. You just sit down on the floor and hold your head in your hands.

Your head is spinning from the crash, still.

Spinning way too much.

You need to sleep.

“Alright, we’ve got all the jars!” Dustin cheers triumphantly.

You groan quietly, but get up.

You have to save the rest of them.

MIKE LEVINSON

You have every member of the party alive.

You have every member of the party alive and ten jars filled with smoke.

“Alright,” Doctor Owens sighs, rubbing his forehead, “I’m going to... study this. As best as I can. But in the meantime –“

“In the meantime, Jane needs to go *home*, and *rest*,” Hopper says firmly.

“We need to make sure we won’t get infected again. We don’t know how much of the Mind Flayer got away from the crash,” Doctor Owens says firmly.

Hopper’s radio buzzes again.

“For fuck’s sake –“ he grumbles, “Yeah, it’s Chief, I’m in the middle of an emergency – *yes I know already* – I’ll be down when I can – let me handle it all –“

“You can’t leave yet, Jim,” Doctor Owens says firmly.

“Like fuck I can’t, I have to take care of –“

“We don’t know who of us is still even partially infected –“

“I got it all out,” Jane mutters tiredly.

“Well, we need to inoculate ourselves against it happening again.”

“How the *fuck* do you propose we do that, Sam?” Hopper snaps.

“Two years ago I used some of Will’s samples to start making a vaccine against the Mind Flayer. It’s imperfect, but when you were both in comas I was perfecting it. I’m going to go back to finish it up now. We will all take it, and then, in theory, it won’t be able to infect us again,” Doctor Owens says hurriedly, before running out of the room.

You look over worriedly at Will.

He’s just crying into his knees.

You look back over at Jane, who is resting in her own arms, and then turn to walk to Will.

“Will?”

He shakes his head against his knees.

“Will, you can talk to me...”

“No,” he whispers quietly.

“Okay,” you mutter, and you go back to Jane, holding her tightly as she turns to sob into your chest.

She’s crying so hard she’s shaking.

You feel your heart break for the millionth time.

You just wish you could all have a break.

A real break.

A real break without suicide or repression or pain or suffering or Demo-monsters or Mind Flayers or possession or illness.

An actual break.

But that would be too good to be true, wouldn’t it?

Eventually, you feel Jane fall asleep on your chest.

So you just hold her tighter.

And fall asleep next to her.

Feeling her soft, curly hair tickle your cheek.

All you really need right now is rest.

A lot of rest.

For a while.

S E P T E M B E R 2 0 1 9 8 6

You still can't drive.

You don't really know if you'll ever be able to, honestly.

But for now, you still can't drive.

Getting behind the wheel reminds you of panic –

Thinking your whole family was going to die –

Thinking Jane was dying next to you –

Blood –

Terror –

The fact that you killed another person –

So you don't get behind the wheel anymore.

Instead, your mom drove you up and now you wait in the lobby, pacing the room while you hear them talk inside.

Eventually the door opens, and Jane comes out with Hopper, smiling weakly at you.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” you greet back, walking over and hugging her.

“I’ll see you next week, alright Jane?” Doctor Owens asks. Jane nods, and you all head out together, getting into Hopper’s truck and heading out slowly.

“How’d it go today?” you ask softly.

“I talked a lot about everything,” Jane murmurs, “It was a lot.”

“Do you want to just go play with the birds and not talk anymore?” you continue. She nods silently.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Hopper agrees.

He drives in silence, Jane flinching as you pass by the place where the crash happened. A little cross has been put up by the community for the person who died – Jack Polaski.

You look away from it and try to not vomit.

The official story is that the other vehicle is unidentifiable, and the other driver was drunk.

You’re glad Hopper could cover it up.

But you wish you didn’t have to live with this feeling in your stomach.

You reach the cabin and walk in with Jane, the two of you pulling out Chester and Eddie. Eddie sits on your shoulder and you scratch the back of his head, just watching as he scrunches up his eyes in happiness.

Jane sits down with Chester on the couch, letting Chester crawl all over her face.

“Jane?”

She looks at you, frowning.

“Yeah Mike?”

“I love you.”

She smiles at you a little.

“I love you too.”

You sit for longer in silence, the two of you just resting on each other, small bird feet hopping all over you both. You sit next to her on the floor for a while, just listening to the sound of her breathing.

It comforts you.

To hear it.

Still.

You feel her lips on the top of your head.

It makes your breath stop for a minute.

“Jane?” you ask softly.

“Yeah?”

“Did you have nightmares last night?”

“Yup.”

“About what?”

“All of it.”

“Okay.”

And you go back to petting birds together.

You wish you knew what to do.

You wish there was something you could do.

But nothing will ever fix this.

Not really.

OCTOBER 13 1986

"I WILL NEVER ATONE FOR THIS, MOM," you scream, "THERE'S NO POINT TO ME EVEN SAYING ANY OF THESE PRAYERS –"

"Mike –"

"NEVER! NEVER! NEVER!"

You're outside the synagogue.

You're a bit crazed with hunger and thirst.

You really hate fasting.

Everyone is passing you and giving you weird looks.

Fuck Yom Kippur.

Not even the chills you get when you all belt out the second line of the sh'ma could help you right now.

"Zeisele," Bubbe murmurs, "Zeisele, come with me."

You follow, reluctantly, because all you want to do is throw yourself into a lake.

You're the reason someone died.

You *killed* someone.

You didn't just not fulfill a mitzvot. You really, really, *really* fucked up.

"Zeisele –"

"Bubbe, I don't think –"

"Mikha'el, *listen* to me."

Your head snaps back up.

"When I was in the camps, I killed another prisoner," Bubbe says

softly.

“You... what?”

“I have told only two other people this story. I have told your Zayde, and I have told your Jane.”

Your eyes widen.

“You told... Jane?”

“Yes. We talked for a long time once, after we met. She asked me if I had ever killed, for she was feeling guilty for having killed those men at the Lab.”

“O...kay.”

“I killed another prisoner on accident. I was trying to get some extra food that had been discarded poorly, and in my haste I knocked another woman to the ground. She never got back up.”

“Oh...”

“I have always felt guilty for it. I have never moved past it. It still hurts and I say kaddish for her on her yahrzeit. It was my fault.”

“Yes, and this is my fault!”

“You did not mean to kill that man. You did not wish for him to die.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Mikha’el, I know that this hurts. I know that your war inside yourself is not going in your favor.”

You nod.

“You need to talk to Doctor Owens about it. And you need to keep reminding yourself that there is nothing you could have done.”

“Okay... okay,” you whisper.

You start sobbing.

“It’s all too much, Bubbe.”

“I know, zeisele.”

“It’s too much, it’s too much, it’s too much... all of it... it’s too much...”

She pulls you into a long hug and squeezes tightly.

“I know, zeisele. I know. I know. I know.”

And you keep sobbing until you run out of tears.

Fasting had at least one upside, you guess.

OCTOBER 31 1986

JANE HOPPER

“Alright, so what are we going to watch next? The Shining or Halloween?” Lucas asks eagerly.

You’re all cooped up in the Byers house, watching TV. Dad and Mrs. Byers are talking in another room quietly. Max has fallen asleep on Lucas’ shoulder, and Lucas is munching on candy. The trick – or – treaters have all stopped coming around by now.

“It’s getting late, kids –“

“But it’s *Friday!*” Dustin begs, “We could stay up all night.”

Mrs. Byers groans.

“Fine –“

“Hooray!” Lucas and Dustin cheer together.

Mike looks over at you and kisses you on the forehead.

“You doing okay?”

“Yeah,” you answer, smiling weakly at him.

Everything is still hard.

A lot.

And memories keep happening.

All the time.

And you wish you knew how to keep going like this.

But you feel like you will be able to.

Once you figure it out.

You all settle in and watch the Shining, you not really paying attention, just resting your head on Mike's chest and snoozing.

In fact, by the time the movie's over, everyone's asleep. You have a feeling Dad and Mrs. Byers are in her room together.

You don't really want to think about that.

Mostly out of embarrassment.

"Mike?" you ask softly.

"Yeah, Jane?"

"Do you want to talk? For a little while."

He looks around at everyone else, fast asleep.

"Yeah, okay," he agrees.

You both go into your room, lying down next to each other on the bed. He holds you tightly around the waist as you look at him from across the pillow.

Your heart starts beating a little faster.

Just a little bit.

Just enough.

"Mike. He's going to come back one day," you whisper.

"Yeah," Mike agrees, looking nervous, "But we'll be ready when he does."

"I just don't know how. If he breaks through fully – not just a ghost of himself –"

"If the gate opens again, you mean?"

You nod.

"Well, then we just won't let the gate open again."

You nod again, smiling weakly.

You wish life were that simple.

That would be nice.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"This isn't... actually what I wanted to talk about," you admit softly.

"Oh?"

"I know that I don't always talk about what I talk about in therapy. Except when you're with me, of course."

"And I'm happy to be there. I know you're nervous to be alone with Doctor Owens, so I'm happy to be there when Hop can't be," Mike reassures.

"Right. Well, last time we talked a lot about how I need to move forward. How focusing too long on the past isn't going to help me. How... how I need to try and move on."

"Okay..."

"We talked a really long time. But I think I'm starting to... starting to... understand. How I want to move on, I mean."

"That's good, Jane."

He reaches out and touches your cheek gently.

You look at him nervously.

"I'm... we're... we're still really young."

"Yeah," he mutters softly, "Very."

"So, not any time soon."

"Okay..."

"But, I think eventually... I think eventually I need to try to make some happy memories. Happy associations. With... everything."

"Okay."

"You know what I'm saying, right?"

"Of course, Jane."

He looks nervous in the low light.

And you feel nervous too.

Too nervous.

"Are you okay with that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I... don't know," you admit softly.

"Jane, you aren't damaged goods. Not to me. We've talked about this," Mike promises.

You smile at him weakly, tears in your eyes.

"I know."

He leans in and kisses you.

You deepen it immediately, gripping his hair in your hands and holding on for dear life.

He squeaks in surprise and pulls back.

“I – thought you said not now?” he asks breathlessly.

You let out a small laugh.

Your heart is still pounding.

And part of you wants to kiss him *more*.

So much more.

And part of you just wants to sleep in his arms like always.

But both sound nice.

Both sound... safe.

“No, not now. But I want to start inching forward.”

“Inching?”

“Inching.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. An inch can be gone back on a lot easier than a mile.”

“Fair enough,” Mike kisses your forehead, “Well, I’m proud of you for being brave.”

You look at him seriously.

“You make me braver, Mike.”

He leans in and kisses you again, softer this time.

“You make me braver, too,” he whispers.

You scoot forward into his arms, and hold onto him tightly, as he

holds onto you, slowly falling asleep.

And that would be enough.

For both of you.

For everything that lies ahead.

END PART THREE

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright time for the usual author's note -

1) I know that head on collisions were worse in the eighties and they should probably be dead. Let's just say they got lucky. Let's just say Mike had an airbag, Jane had psychic powers, they both were wearing their seatbelts, and they got lucky.

2) Let's all bow our heads and mourn for the random driver who died in that car accident and nothing will ever come of it because Hopper is, thankfully, the chief of police, so cover ups happened and oops what IS justice anyway (I don't approve, trust me, but it's not like it's the kids' fault when they had a fucking Mind Flayer chasing them)

3) "Meig you said last chapter that the MF is immune to heat"

"Reader, this was a gasoline explosion. that's not heat, that's a whole other level of energy release"

4) I hope I made Jane calling Hopper "Dad" believable. I tried, at any rate. I think a big part of her getting to that point is both A) coming to terms with what Brenner did to her and how that affected her, and she's started that journey now; and B) actually knowing Hopper's fuckup in s1. I think knowing that Hopper knows he does wrong and has apologized for it is a big part of her relating to him

as a family member, rather than just a caretaker. It's all out in the open now and that's important for her. Hopefully that came across. I know some people are not going to be happy with it, and I just hope I made it bearable, I guess.

5) Though the party aren't going to develop psychic powers from this, I think it's important for me to point out that proximity to Jane has made them all Void sensitive ("true sight" I guess), which is why Mike & Jane could go in and out of their heads. They actually wouldn't have been able to do that with people who aren't exposed regularly to the psionic bacteria

6) Keep in mind that Halloween was nearly two months after Jane remembered everything. So it might seem a little fast because of my pacing for her to be talking about it, but A) it's not actually that fast? B) I feel like having someone literally in your mind listening to your memories and hopes and thought processes is literally the most intimate thing you can do with someone so like???? that already happened??? C) she's at that point of teenagerhood where curiosity & developing hormones are going to start to takeover. It's awkward for me, it's awkward for all of you, it's awkward. It's just awkward and we all have to deal with it.

I fully respect ppl who interpret her reacting to all of this with "nope, never doing anything sexual ever". I think that's fully in character, too. But that's not the way I'm going with it, mainly bc I have to write based on my own experiences, and frankly, when I had to come to terms with my own repressed similar (but good gd not identical for one thing I was like seven years older) experience, forging positive experiences in this category was how I moved on. Doesn't work for everyone, but it worked for me, worked out for a friend I had in junior high [I had an

interesting junior high experience let's not talk about that], but I think that Jane could decidedly go either way on that, so both interpretations are valid. So, I'm just going with the one closer to my experience.

Don't worry, I'm leaving every damn detail out. Y'all don't need to know, I don't need to know, no one needs to know the details. Frankly, I don't even feel comfortable writing them kissing with tongue. Like, don't expect details. Just do not. This story is rated T for the swears.

Thank Gd for that.

7) I was originally going to take a break to recharge and focus on some other things between parts 3 and 4, since NaNoWriMo is over and everything. But... then I got sick with the flu... which delayed writing a bit... and then I found out that the fourth wordiest stranger things fic is a fucking Steve x Billy fic [oh hello romanticising abusive relationships my old friiiiiiend] [that was sarcasm] and I will not forgive myself if they beat me in word count before this story is over. So. I might update a little less frequently (like, every other day instead of every day or something) for a little bit, but I'm probably not going to take a full break. Can't have that terrible terrible ship beat me.

Sorry for Steve x Billy shippers in the audience, I have a lot of feelings about why that relationship in canon is toxic. So many feelings.

This is a long ass author's note, but I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter. Please comment!!! Last chapter was not as well commented and it... really bummed me out, not going to lie. A lot of my regulars have gone AWOL :(so please let me know what you think of this chapter and the last! Thank you all for being wonderful <3 <3 <3

32. Finding Family, Found Family

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for allusions to Mental Breakdowns, references to self harm, and depictions of teenage sexuality

PART FOUR

NOVEMBER 9 1986

JANE HOPPER

You're glad that you don't have to come in more than once a week anymore.

Just once a week is fine for you.

At least, you hope it's fine for you.

You're too tired to really think about it, honestly.

But you also know what you have to do.

"Well kid, are you ready for day one of the new normal?" Dad asks softly as you make your way down the street.

"I guess," you admit quietly.

You don't know *what* you're ready for.

"I know it's tough. Believe me. But you heard the doc."

"Yeah, I did," you agree, "It's just easy for him to say 'trying to set up a new way of normal'. It's not so easy for me to do it."

"Have I mentioned how smart of a kid you are, lately?"

"Dad."

"Sorry, kiddo, I just... I don't know."

You grumble tiredly, but keep staring out of the window.

You know you need to gather the party together and tell them.

They're in this as much as you.

"How has school been going?"

"It goes," you shrug, "I'm doing well."

"I'm proud, Jane. Really proud."

"Thanks."

"Even Spanish?"

"Well... that one's slipping a little."

"You know, I've looked it up. If you drop the language but take some other electives in its place the last two years you can still go to some great colleges."

"I'll think about it," you smile a little at him.

Like the Mind Flayer won't destroy the world before college.

But you don't want to let him down.

"Well, for now, just focus on that."

You stick your tongue out at him, as you pull back up to the cabin.

"Are you working this afternoon?"

"Yup, I'm sorry," he apologizes.

"No, it's okay... can my friends come over?"

"Don't see why not."

"Thanks, Dad."

You grab the birds and then go to the phone to call everyone while

he gets ready for work, heading out into the forest as you watch him go, Eddie on your shoulder and chirping loudly.

Mike is, of course, the first person to get there, running in and kissing you.

“Hello,” you laugh weakly.

“Right, hi,” he responds, smiling a little, “Sorry, you just sounded... weird... on the phone.”

“I... I’ll explain when everyone’s here,” you admit, “I... have a... thing. I want to talk about.”

“Please tell me this isn’t *another* mystery about your dark past –“

“No. I’ve told you all of them now.”

“Thank God.”

You laugh.

“Who’s coming over?” Mike asks, sitting down and looking at you. Chester hops off of your head and flaps over to Mike’s.

“Max, Will, Dustin, Lucas,” you answer softly, reaching up to kiss him. He kisses you back, holding you tightly around the waist.

Your heart goes just a little faster again.

“Jane?” he asks softly.

“What?” you respond, your heart beating loudly in your chest.

“You said... once... well, you said on Halloween... that you knew the Mind Flayer was going to come back?”

“Yeah,” you whisper.

“How do you know that? The Mind Flayer might... want to... but as far as we know... he can’t... right?”

You swallow and look at Mike seriously.

You wish you knew what else to say.

“He has plans.”

“Of course he does,” Mike groans, “What were those?”

“He... wanted... he wasn’t going to kill me, at first,” you admit softly, “This is... this is actually what I was having everyone come over for.”

“Okay,” Mike nods tiredly, “Okay.”

Eventually everyone comes pouring into the room one by one, all sitting down at chairs and things in the living room.

“Okay Max and I were just at the arcade –“

“It *finally* got Gauntlet II so we’ve been playing that –“

“I can’t believe you didn’t invite me along,” Lucas grumbles.

“You said you were busy!”

“Anyways we were in the middle of taking down the dragon when –“

“Okay, that’s not why we’re here,” Mike says, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, Jane, what’s up?” Lucas asks, shooting Dustin a look.

Will smiles at you from the corner.

He hasn’t been talking much lately.

“I wanted to talk about the Mind Flayer,” you say softly.

“But... we got rid of him. He only has a little smoke left on this side, right? And all that’s contained and everything,” Dustin asks.

“Yes, on this side,” you agree, “But on the other side, he’s still strong. Still powerful. Still waiting.”

“But he can’t get through. The gate’s closed. That’s why he was trying to control you in the first place –“

"I will admit he was trying to control me to open the gate," you murmur, "He was going to take over my mind completely, use me to open the gate, and then kill me. But then he realized I would be able to fight back indefinitely so he switched to just trying to kill me."

Mike lets out a broken sound.

"But you fought him off, so it's okay... right?" Max asks, raising her eyebrows at you.

"Well... yes. But he's still trying to get in," you breathe in deeply and slump your shoulders, "And I think he's powerful enough to find another way in."

"So what are you suggesting? We figure out a way to stop our world from being... gate-able?" Lucas asks.

"No... I don't think we can."

"Can I just ask a *quick* question," Dustin groans, "Why the fuck is he doing this?"

"He hates humanity?" Mike offers.

"It's not just that," you mutter, "I... couldn't learn much from him. When he was in there. You all know... what he does in your head."

Everyone nodded in unison.

"It's weird," Will finally whispers.

Everyone turns to look at him.

"The first time... he wasn't like that at all. He didn't talk. I knew... what he wanted me to do... because of emotions. He just had a lot of raw emotion," Will explains, "When he went in my head the second time... it was like he had just... absorbed... everything about people..."

"He learned how to communicate from Dustin and Hopper and used it to prey on our worst fears and whatever mental issues you have," Mike says tiredly.

“The thing is... when he was in my head... I did get glimpses. He was in there long enough for me to just... start to piece some of it together,” you take another deep breath.

“So what do you have?” Lucas asks.

“He wants to destroy us all. He thinks humans are evil, stupid, and corrupt. He wants to... take over our world. Make it like the Upside Down. I think... I think...”

You take a deep breath.

“I don’t... know if this is right...”

“Is it a guess?” Mike asks, frowning at you.

“It’s... a hunch. Based on... well... how he acted,” you explain.

“Alright...”

“He seems to be like a plant.”

“That’s the sentence of the day –“

“He soaks up energy, straight from where he is. That’s why he likes it cold. Too much energy and his... systems? He’s not an Earth thing, his biology isn’t the same... but they start to deteriorate. So he soaks up small amounts of energy, basically all the time,” you begin quietly, “And.. he goes from universe to universe... soaking up energy. And killing it.”

“But... the universe he’s in is basically a mirror of ours,” Mike interjects, frowning more, “How –“

“It *was* a universe exactly like ours. I think... I think there are... I think there are an infinite number of universes. And this thing... hops around. And so he hopped to one next to ours. Identical in every way. And he killed it,” you whisper.

“But this is a guess, right? You might be wrong?” Will asks nervously.

“Maybe,” you admit, “But...”

“But you could tell that he was weak?” Lucas grimaces.

“Could you?” you ask quietly.

“I could tell he was *weakening*, but I figured that was cause he’s jumped from between so many of us by the time he got to me...”

“I think he was losing whatever energy he had left in our world without the link, yes,” you pause, “But when I fought him before... he was... tiring out.”

“So how will he get energy to break through? Seems... unlikely,” Dustin frowns.

“He won’t. He’ll wait for me to fuck up again,” you whisper.

You all look at each other uneasily.

“So... you just don’t fuck up?” Dustin offers.

“It’s not that simple. A, I didn’t do it on purpose the *first* time. And... B... I’m not the only one...”

“Are you saying one of your siblings could open the gate?” Mike whispers.

“I’m saying we should warn them. And, in the event of the Mind Flayer coming back...” you take a deep breath, “We should be able to gather them again.”

“So you want to find your siblings?” Will asks.

You nod silently.

“But... they’re probably... some of them are probably still being researched on. Those that aren’t are probably around the globe. And... you don’t even know what some of them look like...” Mike rambles.

“No,” you agree, “But Doctor Owens does.”

Everyone looks at each other uneasily.

“So you’re saying – and please, let me go through this *insane idea*,” Lucas growls, “That you want to steal files from Doctor Owens –“

“Yes.”

“A man who has done nothing but *help* us –“

“Yes.”

“And then use those files to track down thirteen or so people from potentially around the world –“

“Yes.”

“So that we can tell them that a giant plant monster wants to come in and kill us all –“

“Yes.”

“And we need their help to make sure that doesn’t happen and, you know, fight the thing if it ever comes back?” Lucas finishes.

“Yes,” you say again.

Lucas looks at you.

You look at Lucas.

Lucas looks at you.

You look at Lucas.

And then he throws his hands in the air and leaves the cabin.

“Lucas –“ Max shouts, running after him.

“Well, *I* think it’s a brilliant plan,” Dustin says firmly.

“Shouldn’t we involve the adults in this? We saw what happened last time,” Will asks nervously.

“Probably,” Mike agrees, frowning at you.

"I don't want to."

"Why... not?" Dustin groans.

"Because they'll tell us to not."

"MAYBE THEY'D BE RIGHT," you hear Lucas screams from outside.

"We have to find them," Dustin agrees, "You need to meet them if nothing else, and besides that, the apocalypse is coming."

"This is a cheerful thing to be discussing on a chilly Sunday afternoon," Will mutters.

"Look, I don't want it to happen either," Mike says, jumping up, "But Jane's right. We can't fight this alone. Now that the Mind Flayer knows it has to bring everything it can to defeat Jane."

You look over at Mike in terror and he walks back over, holding you around the waist and kissing your forehead.

"I also just want to find them," you whisper quietly, "Now that I know they're out there."

Mike looks at you sadly.

"But... Kali..."

"I think Jane should talk to Kali, too," Dustin interjects softly.

Mike turns to Dustin with a glare.

"What –"

"What Kali made her see was fucked up," Dustin explains tiredly, "And it hasn't helped her at all in trying to get over this."

Will nods in agreement.

Lucas and Max are hovering by the door.

"But Kali and her are sisters. She means something to Jane. Something important," Dustin takes a deep breath, "And... Jane

learned her unhealthy coping mechanisms from her. Someone needs to help Kali heal.”

“So you’re suggesting the sister that she basically abused?” Mike asks in a snarl.

“I want to help her,” you mutter quietly.

Mike sighs.

“Okay. Fine.”

“Look, I think this is stupid,” Lucas says firmly.

A long silence follows while everyone watches him expectantly.

“And... that’s it?” Mike asks.

“I mean, I wish it was it,” Lucas sighs, “I think this is stupid. But I also think Jane should find her family anyway. But do we *have* to do this in secret?”

“Yes,” you whisper, “Or at least... I don’t know if they’ll let us. I don’t think they’ll be okay with it. I want to tell them. I don’t want to keep secrets anymore. But I also need to do this.”

“Okay,” Lucas sighs again, “Okay. I don’t approve, but okay.”

“So how do we do it?” Dustin asks.

“We figure out how to get the files from Doctor Owens. And we do it before winter break. And then... we find them. Over winter break,” you groan.

“What if they *are* all over the place, though? How can we do that?” Will asks nervously.

“I don’t know,” you admit, “But at the very least I should find out where they are.”

“Let’s tackle that first, then,” Max agrees, “Let’s plan a heist.”

“Heist! Heist! Heist! Heist! Heist!” Dustin starts chanting.

“No, not the chanting –“

“HEIST HEIST HEIST HEIST!” Max joins in with Dustin, the two of them walking up to Lucas and chanting loudly in his face.

“HEIST HEIST HEIST HEIST –“

“What are you heisting?”

Everyone jumps back in shock as Dad walks in, frowning at you all.

“Uh...” Mike’s eyes widen ridiculously, looking at Dad in fear.

“I swear to God, Jane, if you kids are doing something without telling us again –“

You swallow.

“Um... no we’re not.”

“You know what? No. No! No. I don’t have to deal with this. You are all *insane* and I have too much anxiety to do this again so fuck this. Hopper, Jane wants to find her siblings,” Lucas shouts.

“LUCAS!” you scream in horror.

Dad frowns at you.

“How do you propose doing that, kid?”

You look at him in shock.

“Um...”

“She wants to steal the files from Doctor Owens about them all and then track them around the world using her powers,” Will pipes up meekly.

“Okay, first of all, Lucas is correct, that’s insane –“

“Great,” you mutter irritably.

“But I have a better idea.”

You look up at him in shock.

“Wha – “

“Look, you’ve said to me a million times that that... *thing*... is going to try to come back. So I agree you need to find them. You also just should find them for personal reasons,” Dad sighs heavily, “But you can’t do it alone. And you *shouldn’t have to*.”

You look up at him with tears in your eyes.

“But –“

“It’s time *all of you* stop doing things alone. You’re not alone the world. You have all the rest of us. And we’ll help you,” Dad pauses, “I’ll ask Doctor Owens for the files.”

“What if he doesn’t give them to you?” Mike asks, frowning.

“Then we plan a heist.”

“HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST!” Dustin starts shouting eagerly.

“Kid, no –“

“HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST!” Dustin, Max, and you start chanting together, surrounding Dad eagerly.

“Oh no –“

“HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST! HEIST!” Lucas and Will and Mike have finally joined, and the birds are screaming in unison in the background, and Dad just holds his head in his hands until you’ve all chanted yourselves out.

N O V E M B E R 2 7 1 9 8 6

“Okay, kids, lower me down *slowly* –“

“Bring a grappling hook, he said –“

“Steve stop whining –“

“We’ll just be doing something fun with the kids for Thanksgiving, he said –“

“Steve I swear to God, shut *up* –“

“I WILL NOT SHUT UP! I AM CURRENTLY LOWERING YOU DOWN INTO A FUCKING LAB –“

“SHHH!”

All of you kids turn to shush Steve, who glares at you all. Dad is currently hung up on a harness, being lowered down into the building slowly by the kids and Steve. Nancy and Jonathan stand across from you all on the other side of the hole in the ceiling of the building, snickering quietly.

“Alright, I have eyes on it. Jane?”

You perk up.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“I’m gonna need you to come down in here too. Mike?”

“Yup,” Mike responds, rolling his eyes.

“Is there going to be a guard coming by in the next ten minutes?”

Mike groans.

“I don’t want to be looking at the future for *ten minutes* –“

“*Mike* –“

“FINE.”

Mike closes his eyes and puts his fingers in his ears, focusing.

You latch onto the harness as the other kids and Steve lower you down into the hole. You land in an empty, dark office, the light from the street outside shining in through the window.

Dad walks over to you, helping you unbuckle. You look around the

empty office, a chill running down your spine.

“Jonathan? Your turn now!” Dad yells.

“Alright!” Jonathan responds. You watch as he slowly lowers himself into the hole, Steve still grumbling upstairs.

“You guys are good on guards until nine-twenty,” Mike shouts, “Then the night watch will walk by.”

“Alright that gives us seven minutes,” Dad groans, “Jane open this cabinet, alright?”

“Are you sure it’s the right one?” Jonathan asks, frowning.

“I looked for it,” you say, glaring.

“Right, right, sorry Jane –“

You open it up and Dad digs in pulling out file folder after file folder. Jonathan takes out his camera and starts snapping photos rapidly, while you watch the door nervously.

“Uh, guys –“

“We’ve almost got them all – seven, eight –“

“Guys –“

“Ten, Twelve – “

“Guys –“

You can hear footsteps.

Your eyes widen in shock.

You hold your hand up and keep the door closed.

“Hey! Hey! What’s going on in there? We have security cameras, you know!”

“Shit –“ Dad whispers.

“START COMING UP NOW!” Nancy yells.

“Fifteen!” Jonathan gasps, running for the rope. They pull him up, and then you grab hold, still keeping the door shut.

“OPEN THE DAMN DOOR – THIEVES! THIEVES!”

Dad rushes to put all the files away as you’re pulled back up onto the roof.

“COME ON!” Lucas shouts.

“HURRY!” Dustin agrees.

Dad grabs hold as you keep holding the door shut, a long trickle of blood going down from your nose.

“PULL! PULL! PULL!” Steve roars.

Dad climbs onto the ceiling and you help pull him up, before Nancy slams everything back onto the roof and you all take off running.

“We were going to erase the –“

“There’s no time for that, we’ll just have to explain to Doc later. Go! Go! Go!” Dad shouts.

You all sprint back down to the woods, running through a hole in the fence and crawling back out to the car on a side road.

“Alright, Jonathan, develop that film *as soon as possible*,” Dad hisses from the front seat.

Everyone is *very* packed in and at this point you’re basically sitting in Mike’s lap.

Which makes you nervous for different reasons than everything else that evening.

His face is in your neck and your head is on his forehead and you just kind of wish you were alone with him right now which makes your heart pound too quickly again in a good way and your stomach

flutter a little.

“Will, can you get me into the high school photography lab? I don’t feel like trying to set up a dark room at home again.”

“Yeah, you got it.”

“I’ll get you kids into the school tomorrow.”

“You got it, chief.”

“What do the rest of us do?” Lucas asks grumpily. He is sitting on Max’s lap instead, and Max is laughing very quietly behind him.

“You wait for *me* to say what to do next,” Dad says.

“There really are fourteen other Jane’s out there,” Nancy murmurs after a while.

“Yes, all with different powers,” Jonathan groans, “Who knows what they’re doing.”

You frown, and try to not think about it.

You only remember flashes of them now, anyway.

And it hurts.

N O V E M B E R 2 8 1 9 8 6

“Mike?” you ask quietly.

You’re reading together in your room in the cabin, just waiting to hear back about the photographs. You have to study for Chemistry, anyway, as you’ll have a test when you come back from Thanksgiving Break.

“Yeah?”

“Hopper couldn’t fix the boiler.”

“Yeah, I know,” he groans. Sweat is dripping down his forehead.

"You're wearing a sweatshirt."

"Sure am."

"Why not take it off?"

You're in a tank top, that's how hot it's gotten in the cabin.

"Uh... I don't want to."

"Mike..."

"I don't."

"Have you been cutting yourself again?"

"No! I really really haven't, Jane. The only thing I've done that's self-harm-y since... everything... in September is smoked a few ciagrettes. I *swear*."

"Alright... so then why not take off your sweatshirt?"

He sighs.

"I don't want you to get mad at me."

"I won't get mad," you whisper.

"Yeah, you will," Mike shakes his head, "But... I am suffering. And I have to show you eventually, I guess."

He grimaces and takes off his sweatshirt, leaving on his t-shirt.

You usually try to not look at his wrists. After all, the scars are still there, running all over him like a marked up chalkboard. And there are, of course, the long ones, from that awful, awful day a year ago.

But now you look, because you have to make sure he isn't lying.

And you see a number there in black ink.

“Mike?” you whisper.

“Yeah,” he sighs.

“What... is...”

“I went and got it the other day. Nancy lied about my age for me,” Mike admits quietly.

“What – why –“

You’re so confused and upset to see this number on Mike’s wrist that you can’t form words anymore.

“A few reasons, honestly,” Mike sighs, “Um. First one. Right. I... I know how much you hate your number on your arm. And you wish it would go away. I thought... well... I thought I’d show you we’re in this together.”

You glare at him.

You still can’t form words though.

“And then... uh... I know we’re going to go out looking for your siblings soon. And I want them to know I’m one of you... without... explaining it all.”

You glare more.

You could not be more furious right now.

“And... um... it was partly a solidarity thing. For my Grandparents.”

You just keep glaring.

“And – fuck it – Jane, look, I can’t keep looking at the stupid scars on my arms, okay? For fuck’s sake, I can’t look at them! They remind me of everything and they make me want to start up again, especially after everything, so I just – needed – something else to look at!” Mike shouts.

You sigh.

“Mike...”

“Go ahead, yell at me. I fucked up,” Mike whispers.

“I’m not going to yell,” you mutter, “But I’m not happy about this.”

“Yeah... I figured.”

“Mike, if anything, I want my number *off*. Why would you put a number *on*?”

You start crying before you can stop yourself.

“Why would you do this? Why? Why? *Why?*”

“Jane.”

You look up and see him holding your hands tightly in his.

“You can’t get the number off.”

You sniffle heavily.

“And I know it hurts. I know it reminds you of everything that’s happened to you.”

You nod weakly.

“But it’s not your *identity* anymore, Jane. It symbolizes so much more than just your pain and how they fucked you over. It’s also the symbol of you fighting back. Because your powers are how you escaped, not just why you were imprisoned. And I think that’s amazing,” Mike whispers.

“Okay...”

“And I just... I dunno. I want to show we’re a team. Together. Against all this crap that’s tried to hurt you. That’s all,” Mike mutters.

“I still don’t like it,” you mutter quietly, “But I understand.”

“Thanks, Jane,” Mike kisses your forehead, “I’m sorry you don’t like it.”

"It's alright," you sigh, "We don't always have to agree with each other."

He laughs.

"No, no we don't."

He then sighs, looking away from you.

"There's another reason, too. But I don't know if I want to tell you."

You frown.

"Why don't you want to tell me?"

He looks at you seriously.

"Because I think you'll take it the wrong way."

You sigh.

"I'll try not to."

"Alright... um... I'm a psychic now. I'm one of you. It's not just about identifying me to your siblings. It's... I'm so angry. At everything. You know I've always felt otherized, from being Jewish, from my mental illness, from my interests, from being bisexual, from everything with the monster and you and the Upside Down... and now there's this. It's just a whole other level. On some... in some way, I want to embrace it. I want to embrace the fact that I'm a freak. And designating myself as one of you all is a part of that. It's hard to explain. But I *am* Sixteen. It's not a good thing. I don't think it's a good thing, and that's why I'm Mike, first and foremost. But in the grand scheme of things... I'm just another one of their psychic kids. I just came about weirdly. Do you know what I mean?" Mike asks quietly.

You nod.

You turned him into Monster.

No you didn't.

Monster.

No.

Monster.

No.

Monster.

No.

Monster.

No...

"This isn't your fault, Jane. It's theirs. It'll always *be* theirs."

You nod again.

"I understand," you mumble, "It's just..."

"Hard?"

"Yeah," you sigh.

"I understand," he whispers. He reaches out and touches your cheek gently, making you shiver slightly.

"You do?" you mumble.

"The guilt? The inability to escape a thought no matter what you do and how much therapy you go to?" Mike laughs weakly.

"Yeah," you mumble.

"I feel it too, you know," Mike whispers.

You nod, crying a little bit."

"It hurts so much –"

"It does," Mike agrees. "It hurts for me, and it hurts for you, and it

hurts. But we'll be okay. We'll get through it... *together*," Mike promises.

You nod again and press your lips to his, feeling yourself shake a little bit.

"I love you, Mike," you whisper, only pulling back an inch from him, feeling him breathe on your lips. He looks at you, pressing his forehead into yours and closing his eyes.

"I love you, Jane."

You lean in and kiss him again, and he pulls you up closer to him, holding onto you so tightly you can barely breathe, but in a good way. You want to be closer to him.

So much closer.

You feel your breath stop in your throat and you pull back from him, looking at him and biting your lip.

"Mike –"

"Jane, can I tell you something I haven't told you before?" Mike asks softly.

"O-okay?"

"When we met, I just... did you get a feeling... that we understood how each other felt? Better than other people had before?" Mike continues, looking embarrassed.

You frown.

"I think so... can you explain more?"

"That... you understood. What kind of sadness I felt. And that you felt it yourself. Too much sadness for someone our age. But you felt it, and you understood, and I understood, and finally we just... both... *had* someone. Who..."

"Yeah," you whisper, "Yeah. I knew that almost immediately."

“You did?”

“It’s why I trusted you so fast.”

Mike leans in and kisses you again, and you kiss for a long time, just sitting in the room and not even really noticing anything else around you.

“I’m so glad I did, Mike,” you whisper softly against his lips.

He kisses you more, and you squeak in response, making him laugh.

“Mike you are so important to me,” you continue, your heart in your throat, “You taught me so much.”

“Oh come on –“

“About friendship.”

He smiles at you, tears running down his face.

“About love...”

He leans in and kisses you again.

“About how to deal with... this,” you point to your head.

“Jane –“

“So thank you. Thank you for finding me in the woods.”

Mike kisses you again, and he opens his mouth to respond when you hear the front door open.

“We’re back with pictures –“

You jump from Mike’s arms as fast as you can, wiping tears from your eyes.

Awkward Awkward Awkward Awkward Awkward Awkward –

“Um... can we come out in a sec?” Mike asks, his voice in a squeak.

There's a long pause while you grimace to yourself.

"Um... why?" Dad asks, his voice also somewhat odd-sounding.

"Uh... I wanted to tell Jane something and then you came back so we were interrupted," Mike says, grimacing back at you, "I swear that's all –"

"All... right. Fine. Make it... quick."

Mike turns to you and frowns.

"Uh... mood's kinda been broken –"

"Little bit," you agree with a small laugh.

"But. I just wanted to say. That you taught me so many things too," he reaches over and tucks your hair behind your ear, "That people can always be good, even when there's evil. That being someone's friend also means being willing to do whatever you can to save them. That gentleness is healing. And that... that... love hurts, a lot, because you feel what the person you love feels... but its worth it. Every time."

You kiss him one last time as Dad starts to bang on the door with his fist.

"Come on! Please! I don't want to barge in there!"

"COMING!" you shout, frowning angrily. Mike laughs, kisses you one more time, and then you both walk out of the room.

Dad glares at you, but you just sit down, acting as normal as you can.

"Alright, this is what I've got," Jonathan says, ignoring the exchange and putting out photographs all over the table. They're pictures of files, with pictures inside the pictures, but they're still able to be made out.

"So it looks like Number One died when they said," Dad starts, picking up the first photograph and holding it up, "Born Ninteen-sixty one, died in sixty-two. From New York City... named Quinn by

her parents... she was given powers that would help her fight communists and that's all that's really listed."

Jonathan rolls his eyes.

"Who's Two?" you ask nervously.

"Born in sixty two... actual name is Tarek... he can teleport apparently. He's from London. Last location unknown," Dad explains.

"Three was born in sixty-three – I'm noticing a pattern here –"

"I was born in seventy-one," you mumble.

"You were," Dad frowns, "And you're... eleven..."

"So they made one a year?" Mike asks.

"Seems like it."

"Three... born in sixty three... a girl from Tokyo. Named Fumiko. She can alter people's memories," Dad says with wide eyes, "She works for the US Government after being released at the age of eighteen... Bet her powers had something to do with her getting out..."

"Four, born in sixty four... boy from South Africa... named Mpilo... He... *woah*," Jonathan whispers.

"He *what*?" Dad asks, frowning.

"He can *raise the dead*," Jonathan whispers, "And mind read the dead... he's also working with the US government after being released..."

"How can *necromancy* let you get released?" Mike asks. Your mouth is just open in shock.

"I'll raise an undead army against you if you don't let me have my damn freedom?" Jonathan asks, rolling his eyes.

"Five was born in sixty five like we'd think... girl from Minneapolis... named Renee. She has a supercomputer brain apparently, and super

intelligence. Can literally calculate or figure out any problem. That's handy," Dad frowns, "Last location unknown..."

"Probably figured out how to break out," Mike offers.

"Six... sixty six... boy from San Diego... Eric," you whisper, picking up the next one yourself, "Invisibility and energy shield. Location unknown."

"Well that's what they get for making an invisible kid," Dad snorts. You whack him lightly on the arm.

"Seven... sixty seven.... Girl from the South Dakota Lakota reservation holy fuck," Mike gasps, "Uh... name's Wiconi... she has healing powers. Apparently she's a known aggressor. Fighting back against the government and is 'armed.' That's all that's listed."

"Curious to know how she escaped with healing powers, but I bet she's got moxy," Dad says.

"Eight... we know eight," you sigh, "Born in sixty-eight... that seems right. Kali. From London. Last known location is apparently Seattle."

Mike squeezes your hand tightly and you squeeze his back.

"Alright nine was born in sixty nine, he's a boy from Scotland. Named Craig. He can basically trick people's minds and persuade people easily... so Jedi mind tricks," Jonathan snorts.

"Where is he?" you ask.

"Location unknown."

"Tricked his way out of the lab. Nice," Mike laughs.

"Ten was born in seventy... boy from Toronto... named Terry... he has a photographic memory. And telephotography," Dad frowns, "What does *that* mean..."

"It means he can remember *anything* and then put whatever that is on a surface, like a piece of paper. Like he took a picture of it and then printed that picture on whatever he wants," Mike whispers.

"His location's unknown too," Dad sighs, throwing that photo down, "Sweet Jesus could they keep track of *any* of these kids..."

"They did for some," you remind tiredly, "I'm eleven..."

"Born in seventy one. Name Jane. Powers of telekinesis and manipulation of space," Mike reads aloud, looking tired, "There's a note... inoculated with powers of time manipulation but has lost those."

You sigh.

"Last location... Hawkins, IN, cooperating with lab facility."

"Give me that, kid, we don't want to focus too much on that," Dad says quietly.

"Twelve," Jonathan says, taking a deep breath, "Seventy-two. Boy from Puerto Rico. Name is... Rico. Alright then. He's... still being tested on. In a lab in New York," Jonathan sighs.

You glare in fury.

"Thirteen," Dad continues, frowning, "Girl from Israel. Born in seventy three... named Rivka... can communicate with animals. Location unknown."

"She's thirteen," Mike whispers.

"Probably used some sort of animal to help her break out," Jonathan offers.

"Fourteen is a girl from Mexico, named Maria. Born in seventy four... she can interpret any language *and* glean meaning from artefacts," Mike says, "Being tested on in a lab in Texas."

You keep glowering.

"Finally Fifteen... born in seventy five... boy from Colombia... named Eduardo. He... is pyrokinetic and can just in general manipulate energy. Great," Dad groans, "Just great. His location is unknown."

“There was also a file for you, Mike, but –“

“We don’t need to go over that,” Mike mutters.

“Alright. Jane, do you want to try to find where these guys all are?”
Jonathan asks.

“Not right now,” you admit, “I’m... kinda tired.”

“Alright,” Dad agrees, “Tomorrow then.”

You look at the pictures of all of them.

You know they’re different now.

But you remember their faces from when you were a kid.

And it hurts every inch of you.

N O V E M B E R 3 0 1 9 8 6

“Hey Jane?”

You look up at Will, frowning.

“Hey, Will... did you want to talk?”

“Yeah,” he mutters, sitting down next to you, “I just... I wanted to say...”

You frown.

“What?”

“I wanted to say that I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“Wait, *what?*”

“If I hadn’t – accidentally – if the Mind Flayer hadn’t gotten me first
–“

“Stop it,” you say firmly, glaring at him, “Will, it’s not your fault that thing took control of you.”

He nods, and he starts sobbing, holding his face tightly in his hands.

“Will?” you whisper.

“I just... I just... I didn’t w-w-want to have him... back in my h-h-head... but then he was... then he was... Jane...” Will keeps sobbing, pressing his face into the pillow of the bed you stayed at when Dad visited Mrs. Byers – Joyce’s – house – Jonathan’s bed. Your bed. Kind of.

“What did he say to you in there?” you ask quietly.

“I don’t w-w-wanna say.”

“Okay Will. Can I hug you?”

He nods into the pillow and you get up, walking over to hug him. He sits back up and cries heavily into your chest, sobbing and sobbing. You just rub his back, trying to not cry yourself.

“I just... want... to be left... alone...” Will sobs out.

“I know Will, I know.”

“I don’t want any of this.”

“I’m sorry, it’s all my –“

“Don’t say its your fault!”

You look at him and he’s glaring at you through is tears.

“It’s not! It’s not your fault!”

“Okay,” you whisper.

Will keeps sniffing, holding his head in his hands.

“I’m sorry, too. It’s my fault.”

“What – what’s your –“

“I’m the reason Hop sold you out to the bad guys –“

You sigh heavily.

You talked a lot about this with Dad and Doctor Owens in therapy.

You talked about it to death.

“No, Will. It was no one’s fault, okay? Not mine, not yours. It might be Dad’s. But... that’s still not your fault.”

“Okay,” Will mumbles, “The Mind Flayer made me think it was my fault.”

“Well that’s the Mind Flayer being a dick.”

Will giggles.

“Is... the Mind Flayer... always wrong?”

“Yes,” you answer immediately.

“Good,” Will says firmly.

A long silence follows.

“Will? Why is it... good?”

“I... don’t...”

“Okay, okay, sorry –“

“Jane,” Will pauses, “No, it’s... it’s fine. I’ll... I’m scared.”

“Scared of...?”

“I... Jane, I don’t...” Will swallows, tears leaking out of his eyes, “I... I know you don’t care about this stuff. That’s why I’m telling you first. And also you’re like my sister.”

“Okay...”

“I... might... be...” and then he mumbles another word.

“Will, I didn’t –“

He leans up to your ear and whispers into it, "I think I'm... gay."

"Oh," you say, "That's great, Will."

"But –"

"*That's great, Will,*" you say firmly. Will smiles weakly.

"Thank you Jane. But it's terrifying. I'm so so so so scared –"

"I know," you whisper softly, "I know. I know. But it'll be okay. You know your mom and Jonathan aren't going to care if you ever tell them."

Will nods, smiling more, still crying.

"And you know all of our friends won't care either."

"I know, just... people have always... bullied me... for being... weird..."

"Well they're wrong," you shrug.

He hugs you tightly, and you hug him back.

"And you don't have to tell anyone you don't want to so it's not like people can bully you more. And even if they bully you more I'll just beat them up," you say, shrugging.

Will giggles.

"You shouldn't –"

"I will anyway."

You both laugh together more, Will looking cheered.

"So what did that Mind Flayer even say to you in your head?" you ask curiously.

"Oh... just that I'm going to die of AIDS and that the world would never accept people like me," Will sighs, "The usual kind of thing."

"I'm sorry, Will..." you mumble, "I'm really, really sorry."

"I'm so scared."

"You have all of us behind you, I promise."

"Thank you Jane."

"Jane! Will! Get in here!"

You look at each other in confusion before getting up and walking out into the kitchen, where Dad and Joyce are sitting at the kitchen table. They're holding hands, and looking at you both nervously.

"Alright... so... um... how would you both feel... if..." Dad groans, holding his face in his hands, "Ugh..."

"Since Jonathan's moved out to college, and that cabin is way too small and isolated, Hop and Jane are going to move in with us. Is that okay, Will?" Joyce asks.

Your eyes widen.

"The birds –"

"Are more than welcome here," Joyce says firmly.

"Yes! Yes this is okay! I get to hang out with Jane all the time! This is great!" Will cheers, holding his arms over his head in excitement.

"Is Jonathan okay with me taking over his room?" you ask nervously, "I know that he still stays here over breaks..."

"Yeah he's fine with it. On those days you'll have sleepovers with will," Joyce says, shrugging, "It's not like he's over here for very long, with all his activities and everything..."

"Are *you* okay with that? Sleeping in Will's room?" Dad asks, frowning.

"Yeah!" you and Will say in unison.

"Alright then. I guess just respect each other's privacy when that

happens,” Joyce laughs.

“This is great! This is great! This is great!” Will cheers, pulling you up from the table. You both dance around together, chanting “This is great!” in unison, while Dad and Joyce look on in confusion.

“Well, I guess they’re fine with it –“

“Yeah, yeah, I owe you five bucks.”

You’re just excited that you get to see your friends, somehow, even more often than before, really.

DECEMBER 6 1986

“Alright so they’re all in the continental US, thank *God*,” Dad groans as the whole party convenes together at the Byers house, “But the problem is is that they’re *all over* the continental US.”

“So we can’t talk to them all?” Dustin asks grumpily.

“We *can*, but there’s no way you kids can fit it all in to your winter break,” Dad sighs, “So you guys aren’t going to look for them. I will a little, and some other adults will, but it can’t be you.”

“But... you need me to find them,” you say, frowning, “Kali alone changes her location all the time – since I first found her she’s moved *three times*. That’s in *one week*.”

“We’ll call you regularly to ask –“

“This is ridiculous,” Lucas grumbles.

“You kids can’t miss finals,” Mike’s Mom says firmly, “You can’t. Your education has suffered *enough* from all this.”

“Won’t matter when the apocalypse comes,” Lucas mutters under his breath.

“Look, we get that you kids want to help, but it’s better if we handle this. We’ll keep you in the loop, we promise,” Joyce says.

You all look at each other and glare.

“Fine,” you mutter.

“Alright. So we’ll start the hunt soon. Do you kids want to keep hanging out?” Zayde asks.

“Uh... yeah, we do,” Max says, looking at the rest of you furtively. You all nod back at her.

“Alright. Jim, let’s go do that supply run...”

The adults all leave. When you’re sure they’re gone, you all convene together in a circle, looking at each other seriously.

“Alright,” Lucas says, “I know that I’m usually the naysayer here but even I think this is ridiculous. Jane has to be there.”

“So what do we do?” Will whispers.

“It’s obvious,” Mike says, “We go ourselves. Starting winter break.”

“But you heard him, we won’t be able to do it in time –“

“We have our zoomer,” Mike says, shrugging, looking over at Max and grinning. She grins back.

“Aren’t we all glad I finally got my license –“

“And if we miss the beginning of the semester life will go on. As someone who had to do make up last year... I agree we shouldn’t miss finals. We just have to keep sabotaging them so that *they* don’t leave *before* finals,” Mike continues.

“How do we do that?” Dustin asks, grinning.

“Oh I’m sure we can find ways –“

“Jane and I can play up the mental illness card to make Jim and Mom think they can’t go,” Will offers.

“Good. I’ll do the same – “

“Isn’t that... manipulative?” Dustin asks, frowning.

“Yeah, a little, but to be fair, they manipulated us first – saying we could help when they probably didn’t mean it –“ Mike grumbles.

“It is a bit... sketchy,” Will agrees, looking annoyed.

“Alright, alright. We don’t have to do that though, me and Lucas and Max, right?” Dustin asks.

“Right,” Mike agrees, “and it’s not like any other adults are involved since Hop wants Steve to stay at the station and man the fort,” Mike says, nodding, “And then, while we study for finals, we also prep to go.”

“Sounds good,” Lucas agrees.

Everyone looks at him in shock.

“What? We’ve already established that I think it’s ridiculous that Jane doesn’t get to go!”

“Jane, you have to be checking their locations all the time. At least once a day. So we know where we’re going and do this *quick*,” Mike orders, looking at you and frowning.

“I can do that,” you agree, frowning back at him seriously.

“Alright. We have our plan. And we head off at the start of winter break. No one mind me but I’m bringing the electric Menorah –“

“Oh man, I’m missing Christmas,” Dustin grumbles.

“We’ll celebrate it in the car, okay?” Lucas offers.

“Yeah, yeah...”

“What do we do about the people still trapped in labs, though?” Will asks suddenly.

“We have two psionics, one zoomer, and then us lowly mortals,” Lucas laughs, “We’ll figure it out.”

"Agreed," Dustin nods, "Maybe bring some... weaponry... just in case..."

"Can you get Steve to give you his bat?" Mike asks seriously.

"Well, I can certainly *trick him* into giving it to me when we hang out. So yeah," Dustin agrees.

"Perfect."

"Do we have a *car* to do this in?" Lucas asks seriously.

"I have my own car," Max reminds.

"You have your *step brother's* car that he *gave to your parents, not to you* –"

"Whatever, it's basically mine now anyways."

"That's a small car," Will points out.

"Yup. We're going to be close on the open road," Max grins.

"This'll be an adventure," Dustin laughs.

"But one that I can actually get behind," Lucas admits.

You grin, "Thanks, guys."

"Of course," Lucas says, hugging you, starting a hug pile of everyone together.

"We want you to find your old family. As your new family," Dustin agrees.

"And we're going to help you *together*," Max says firmly.

You all hug again, and then start planning in secret, hiding everything from the adults when they get back.

You try to hide your nervousness from them as best you can.

You hope they want to see you.

Notes for the Chapter:

THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR WONDERFUL COMMENTS!!!!!!!!!! <3 <3 <3 <3 That was seriously wonderful and I'm glad you all showed your support :) thank you :) :) :

Here we are! Part Four, the last of the book. This is... this is so weird. I'm so close to finishing this. I have no idea how I feel about it.

Who's ready for a ridiculously long chapter next time cause I AM! WOOO!

I'm so glad we're all in agreement about Steve x Billy. It's cathartic, truly. United against Abusive Ships.

I hope you all liked this chapter, and please comment again!!!!!!!!!! Ahhhh I love you all <3 <3 <3 <3 it's so great to hear what you all think and I hope I continue to enjoy that privilege :)

33. Run Boy, Run

Notes for the Chapter:

I hate this chapter.

Good luck.

Hydrate. Take breaks.

Sims of the different Psychic OCs are included in the text (as links on the numbers) for visual reference because I am a nerd and needed a writing break. Clothing may or may not match what is described in the text because the sims is a limited medium. I show them as they'd like to be seen (so, with hair, for those still in Labs).

Trigger warning for mentions and allusions to all the bad shit that's happened in this story.

D E C E M B E R 20 1986

M I K E L E V I N S O N

First day of Winter Break.

Finals were over.

Papers turned in.

This is it.

It's time.

You look up at the ceiling over your bed, nervousness coursing through you.

“Mike? You there? Mike? *Do you copy?*”

“Yes, I copy,” you say, holding down the button on your walkie,

“What’s the time of arrival?”

“Approximately ten minutes. Get ready.”

You nod and you grab your bag that you’ve been prepping for weeks, putting on a coat and then sneaking out to the front door. You close it quietly, putting your keys in your pocket and sprinting over to the car waiting at the end of the street.

Lucas and Max wave you on frantically as you get into the backseat and the car speeds away, you high fiving Lucas as you head off to Dustin’s.

“Dustin? You there? Dustin? *Do you copy?*” Lucas says as you get close enough for the radio to pick up.

“Aye chief, I copy. I’ll be out there in two.”

“Don’t wake up your cat again –“

“Look, the practice run was perfect besides that –“

“Oh my God *shut up*, the more we talk the more we stick out,” Max hisses.

“Right – go!”

You all wait outside Dustin’s house, until the small figure of him sprinting out towards you can be seen, all of you waving him forward until he dives into the car.

“Go!” you hiss, and Max drives off to the Byers’, the night sky looming above you all. You can see some stars in the sky, and the part of the moon that’s still visible.

It sends a shiver down your spine.

You pull up to the Byers house and you watch as Jane and Will sprint out from it, Jane turning around only for a moment in sadness.

You can hear one of the birds call out after her.

“Jane! Get in!” Max hisses, “We have to *go!*”

Jane nods and dives in next to you, resting her head on your shoulder.

“Go! Go! Go!” Dustin urges.

The four of you are cooped up in the backseat, packed so tight and not enough seatbelts for you all. It makes you terrified.

“Alright, we’re going to go gas up and then head off to Chicago. Jane, you checked, right? Terry is still there?”

“Yup,” she whispers, “Still there as of an hour ago.”

“Alright, we’re off.”

Max presses the peddle down to the bottom of the car, hard, and you zoom off into the night, Dustin whooping excitedly behind you all.

“Also Max if you need someone to take over I got my license today –“

“Yesterday –“

“Fine, yesterday,” Dustin sticks out his tongue.

“Sorry that this is your birthday present,” Will says, frowning.

“Eh, we needed to save up gas money. It’s fine,” Dustin shrugs, “Let’s *go!*”

You drive over to the nearest gas station and everyone jumps out of the car, the rest of you all running into the store while Max fills up the car.

You run through the aisles and grab junk food, watching in amusement as Jane immediately dives for the frozen food and grabbing Eggos. You all run up to the cashier, buy it, and Max runs in to pay for the gas before you all sprint back out and drive away.

“Go! Go! Go!” Lucas urges, and Max takes off again, driving off to the highway and pulling onto it as quickly as possible.

"Follow the signs to Chicago, I'll lead you when we get there," Jane says.

"Alright, and *please*, don't spill in my car," Max begs.

"I maintain this is not your car," Lucas laughs.

"Oh please –"

"Just drive, we're young and inexperienced and could get pulled over by a real cop. A real cop who *doesn't answer to Hopper*," you insist.

"Fine, *Mom*," Max snorts.

"I'm just being realistic! We can't get caught!"

"If we get caught, we have to psychics to help us get out of it, I don't see the problem," Dustin laughs.

"You seem to grossly overestimate our powers –"

"Your powers, maybe, but *Jane's? Seriously?*"

"Guys, I'm tired, let's just sleep until we reach the city," Will begs.

"Alright, alright," you agree. Jane nestles against you, and you all fall asleep in the car, except Max and Lucas, who continue to focus on getting you all there.

You wake up in the center of a huge city, as dawn starts to peek out over the skyline.

You've never been to Chicago before.

But everything is huge, and overwhelming, and the buildings are taller than you really knew was possible.

"Rise and shine Mike-a-roo," Dustin says, "We're getting close."

"Can we get coffee?" Max groans, "I'm dying."

"Terry lives up in Lakeview," Jane murmurs, "We'll pass coffee shops on the way."

"I hate city driving," Max grunts, but she keeps going down the city highway, other cars moving slowly around you.

"So at what point do we call home and tell our parents we're alive?" Will asks nervously.

"Probably when we make that coffee stop," Lucas says, "I agree we should call soon."

"I vote we call your mom, Will, since she's probably the most freaked out and the one least likely to flip her shit," Dustin offers.

"I disagree on that last point, but I agree she should be the first," you snort.

"Alright well, we're finally reached Lakeview," Max grumbles, "Can I *please* stop for coffee?"

"Yeah, just finda shop somewhere and *parallel park!*" Dustin says, wiggling his fingers in a fake-menacing way. Max scoffs, finds a coffee shop, and parks.

"I see a payphone," Will says, "I'll go call mom."

Max doesn't say anything, just runs in to get coffee. Lucas follows her in with an eyeroll.

Jane sits in the car.

"What is it?" you ask her worriedly, reaching for her hand.

"I think I should warn Terry we're coming," Jane murmurs.

"But..."

"We're near his apartment. I don't... I don't want to freak him out," Jane mumbles.

"Alright," you agree softly, "Do you want me to be in the void with you?"

"Yes, please."

You both drop into the void, and walk together through the water. She takes your hand, and you can see in the distance another person.

He's a tall, skinny boy, with medium brown skin and a messy black afro, and large glasses on his face. He's wearing a t-shirt and jeans, both looking extremely ratted and unwashed. He's sitting down at a desk, with pages and pages of paper surrounding him, smoking a cigarette and staring out in front of him.

"Hello," Jane says, looking terrified.

He jumps in his seat.

"Fuck –"

"It's Eleven," Jane whispers, "Do you remember me?"

She walks up to him, showing her arm.

Terry looks at her in shock.

"How... did you find me..."

"It's part of my powers," she pauses, "Do you remember me?"

"Yeah," he mutters, "I remember you."

"You're ten, right? But your name is Terry."

"Yeah, I'm ten," he says, showing his arm.

010

"We're here because we want to talk to you," Jane continues, "Face to face."

"Wait – you know where I *am*?" Terry shouts, looking panicked. He quickly starts to gather his papers in front of him.

"I only know because of my powers – stop it!" Jane shouts.

Terry whirls on his heels to glare at her.

“Who knows who you dragged along with you –“

“Look, man, let’s just talk,” you say.

He glares more at you.

“I don’t remember you.”

“That’s cause I’m a newcomer,” you say grimly, showing your wrist to him, “Look, just let us talk to you.”

Terry frowns for longer.

“Fine. But try to be discrete, you imbeciles.”

You look over at Jane, her frowning at you nervously, as you blink out of the Void.

“Where’d you guys go?”

You look up to see Dustin looking at you both, his mouth filled with food.

“We warned Terry we were coming in the void,” Jane says tiredly.

“Alright, we should get going then,” Lucas frowns, “Where’s Will?”

You all look outside, where Will is leaning against the phone booth, grimacing.

“Oh shit,” Dustin whispers.

“I’d go talk to him but I have this,” Max says, holding up a huge thing of coffee.

“I’ll go,” you say, rolling your eyes and leaving the car. You walk over to Will, who grimaces at you more.

“Yes, I know I should have at least told you guys that we were doing this or left a note... I’m sorry... I’m *sorry!* Look, I really need to go – yes we’ll be safe – yes I’ll check in from time to time – sorry – sorry – sorry! I love you! *Bye!*” Will slams the phone down on the receiver and groans.

“That thrilled, huh?” you ask, grimacing.

“I don’t even want to *talk* about it,” Will sighs, “Let’s just go.”

You both run back to the car and head off, driving just a little bit further into the neighborhood and parking next to a run-down apartment building. You all walk up the fire escape stairs outside, before Jane knocks on the right door.

“Coming – Jesus –“

The door opens and Terry looks at you all with wide eyes.

“What the – there are more of you –“

You all just head inside, Lucas closing the door behind you all.

“Sorry, we’re just... looking for everyone,” Jane admits.

“Everyone? *Everyone?*” Terry groans, holding his hands over his eyes, “Fuck... okay. You better have a good reason for this.”

Jane opens her mouth to answer, but Terry cuts her off.

“And, seriously, none of this ‘I want to find my family’ crap,” Terry snaps, pulling out another cigarette and smoking it angrily, “It’s safer for all of us if we just leave each other alone. And if you *really* wanted to do this for that reason, you could have just fucking talked to me in the Psychicspace.”

“Psychicspace?” Will asks.

“I think it’s what he calls the Void,” you mutter.

“It’s not just that,” Jane says, “Though it is part of it.”

“Alright, what’s the other part then?”

“There’s something coming.”

“Don’t be fucking cryptic, just say it,” Terry rolls his eyes.

Jane sighs heavily.

"A weird shadow monster is going to break into our world and try to destroy us all," Jane says simply.

Terry frowns at her.

He gets up and starts pacing around the tiny apartment.

"Eleven –"

"Jane."

"Jane. Why on *earth* do you think *that's* going to happen?"

"Because I've met the monster. I've fought him off before. But... But I don't know if I can defeat him completely," Jane whispers.

"And why are you coming to me? I just remember things and make pictures of them," Terry snorts.

"Because this guy is smart," you say, frowning, "He's smart, and we need everyone we can get to try and bring him down."

Terry taps his fingers rapidly on the counter.

"Look, I just don't see how I can help."

"Again, this guy is smart," Lucas says, glaring at Terry, "He tried to take out our party by making Jane have a mental breakdown."

Terry looks over at Jane with a frown, before sighing.

"Look, I'm sorry that happened to you. You've always been the sweetest of us."

Jane looks down at her shoes.

"But I just... I have it good here. No one questions me. No one tries to stop me from living. And those stupid buffoons can't find you. I don't know what kinda deal you've made so that you're not literally fearing for your life by finding me right now, but –"

"We can make that deal for you too," you pipe in, though you have no idea if it's true.

Terry smiles sadly.

“No you can’t. But thanks for being optimistic, new kid.”

“Why can’t we? Just out of curiosity,” Dustin says.

“Because I’m the right mixture of ‘extremely valuable powers’ and ‘not very good in an escape situation,’” Terry frowns, “It was a miracle I got out of there and I’m staying out if it kills me. Which I guess it will, if I’m as important for saving the world as you think.”

“Jane’s really valuable, too, though –“

“Yeah, and you’re a fucking telekinetic witch,” Terry smirks at Jane, “I bet you got out in a blaze of glory, right?”

“No,” Jane mutters, “I didn’t.”

Terry frowns.

“When did you get out?”

“Three years ago. I cut a hole open in our universe on accident while they were using me to find the Russian Spies,” Jane sighs.

Terry purses his lips together and nods, eyes wide.

“Like I said. Blaze of glory.”

“I wouldn’t call it glory –“

“Eh, you made a huge problem for them. Good for you, honestly.”

“And a bunch of people died,” Jane mutters quietly.

Terry frowns more, “Wow. You really haven’t changed, have you?”

“I wouldn’t fucking know,” Jane snaps, “Since I’m still repressing most of my damn memories.”

An awkward silence hangs over the room.

“I wouldn’t know how to do that,” Terry admits, “Given that I’m

cursed with a perfect memory. And I do fucking mean *cursed*. You'll never complain about forgetting things again if you had a mind like I do."

"Exactly. Who better to help us not miss a single detail about this monster?" you offer.

"I understand why you want help, kid, but –"

"You're the same fucking age as us!" Jane screams, "Why won't you help us?"

"Too much risk for the theoretical reward. Like I said. I'd rather die than go back to that lab. And you should be more careful what you're doing out there with your free time," Terry says, pointing a pen at Jane, "Unless you want to go back too."

Jane glares, turns on her heel, and stomps out of the door. Everyone else follows her, except you, still glaring at Terry.

"She's been through a lot," you say angrily, "You could at least be *nice* to her. Have fun living alone."

You then leave, slamming the door behind you. You hop down the stairs and reach the car, getting in next to Jane as Max takes off.

"Alright," she sighs, "Who's next on the closeness list?"

"Nine. Craig. He's in Northern Wisconsin," Jane grumbles.

"What do you think the odds are we'll have a better time with him?" Will asks tiredly.

"Probably low," Max sighs.

"Yeah, he chose the middle of nowhere to hide," Lucas pauses, "Seems unlikely."

"Well, we have to try anyway," Jane grunts angrily.

"Well, we have a six-hour drive ahead of us," Max pauses, "Soon Dustin we're gonna switch."

“Sounds good.”

“I’m serious, next rest stop –“

“Yes, Max!”

Jane stares out the window irritably, her face drawn into a glare as she watches the city disappear behind you.

“Jane?” you ask softly.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” Jane sighs, “I’m too tired.”

“Okay,” you murmur, and lean over to kiss her cheek. She smiles and blushes, turning back to rest her head on your chest.

“So tonight we should find a motel so Max can like, fucking *sleep*,” Lucas suggests after a while spent driving, Max pulling up to a rest stop.

“Will they rent to a bunch of teenagers?” Will asks, frowning.

“Well, if we get a crappy enough one,” Lucas pauses, “Slash, we beg.”

“This is fun,” Dustin says, pursing his lips together.

“Well we’ll hopefully have more luck going forward. They can’t *all* be like Terry,” Will says firmly.

“Famous last words,” Max grumbles. She and Dustin switch places, and you all keep driving up to the northern half of Wisconsin.

Eventually you pull up to a small town, snow billowing around you.

“I... do not like the look of that,” Lucas mutters as you pull up to a small cottage.

“Well, we’ll get out of here quick,” Dustin says firmly, parking the car, “Jane, be fast.”

“Yeah,” Jane sighs, and you follow her up the drive.

“Are you okay to do this today? We *could* go tomorrow instead,” you

offer, reaching out for her hand.

She just shakes her head.

“We have to do this quickly.”

She rings the doorbell, looking determined, as the door opens only a crack.

“Ye?”

“It’s me. It’s Eleven,” she says softly, “Open up.”

There’s a long pause.

Finally the door opens, and a boy looks out at you all, frowning. He has pale skin light brown hair, with a striped t-shirt on and jeans. He looks even dirtier than Terry did, with patches of dirt all over his face and clothes.

“Prove it.”

She holds up her arm.

He holds his up in response.

009

“What are ya doin’ ‘ere?” he asks, frowning.

“We need to talk,” Jane says firmly.

He opens the door and lets her in, you both coming to stand in the entryway.

“Did ‘nyone follow ya?” Craig asks, looking back and forth between you.

“No,” Jane says firmly.

“How’d ya know where I was?”

Jane just points to her head. Craig sighs.

“Alright, Eleven –“

“Jane,” Jane says softly.

Craig nods.

“M name’s Craig. Bet ya already kne’ tha’, tho, ey?”

Jane nods, smiling slightly.

“Wow. You’ve changed quite a bit huh?” Craig frowns, “N who’s this lad?”

“Mike,” you say, smiling weakly, “Um... long story.”

“Okay ‘en,” Craig shrugs, “I guess ya’ not ‘ere to just tell long stories?”

“No,” Jane says firmly, “We’re here to talk about something important.”

Craig grins a little.

“Ya hannaie changed a bit, ya know?” Craig laughs, “Not since ya were a wee lass –“

“Yeah, yeah, I’m the kindest –“

“Eh, more like ya don’ take any shite, do ya?” Craig rolls his eyes, “I remember when Eight –“

“Eight?” Jane whispers.

“We don’t have time, Jane,” you mutter.

“Right,” Jane nods, frowning, “Um... there’s a monster coming.”

“A monster?”

“A monster,” Jane repeats, “And we need everyone’s help.”

“Oh... naw. Naw. ‘M sorry, Janey, I am, but I cannae –“

“The monster’s going to destroy the whole world!” you shout, furious that you’re at a dead end again, “Everyone! Including you!”

“M just a charmin’ lad, eh?” Craig frowns, “Just can persuade people –“

“Yeah, so you could persuade the monster, or persuade people to fight – stuff like that!” you shout.

“I dunnae like your tone, kid –“

“YOU’RE ONLY TWO YEARS OLDER THAN US –“

“Tha’s it. Sorry Janey, but yah boyfriend is... too much.”

Jane glares at you as you both leave the house, walking over to the car.

“You fucked that up completely –“

“Yeah, I did,” you groan.

“Care to explain *why*?” Jane snaps as Max wordlessly starts driving away, everyone looking at you in worry as you pull back onto the road.

“Because – because – we can’t keep letting them all not join us!” you splutter out.

“It’s not... really their fault that they’re nervous about it. The people who ran this program were awful,” Dustin reminds.

“I know,” you grumble.

“He might have *listened to me* if you hadn’t gotten all mad!” Jane snaps.

“Okay – okay – I think we need to rent a room and just. Calm down. Okay?” Dustin offers, “We all just need to calm down, rest up, and then start again.”

Max pulls into a small, crappy motel, and you manage to rent two

rooms next to each other. You wordlessly follow Jane into one of the rooms, her turning around and glaring at you.

“Mike –“

“I know, I’m sorry,” you mutter, “I really am.”

Jane sighs.

“I know that you’re scared. I’m scared too. But we have to be... nice?”

“Diplomatic?” you offer.

“Yes,” Jane nods, “Diplomatic. Together. We can’t fuck this up again.”

“Isn’t the next one the kid who lives in the woods?”

Jane frowns and nods.

You groan.

“That’ll go *great*.”

“Well, let’s sleep,” Jane says firmly, “I need sleep.”

“Shouldn’t Will be joining us?” you ask, looking around in confusion.

“I think he’s going to be in the other room.”

“O-oh,” you squeak. You can feel a blush come up to your cheeks.

Jane rolls her eyes.

“We’re just sleeping, Mike.”

“Yeah, I know!” you respond defensively.

“Sure you do –“

“I do!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I do!”

She kisses you on the cheek, still smirking at you teasingly, before going into the bathroom to change.

You groan and lie down on the bed, holding your face in your hands.

This was gonna be a *long* trip.

D E C E M B E R 21 1986

“Alright fuckwads,” Dustin groans, driving slowly through the snowy northern Minnesota landscape, “We’re almost at the forest.”

“What’s the plan?” Lucas asks seriously.

“We find her,” Jane says simply, “She moves around the forest.”

“Right, easier said than done, then,” Max says, rolling her eyes. But Dustin parks the car, locks it, and you all head out into the snowy woods.

It’s freezing.

And the trees are *everywhere*.

Pine needles covered in thick layers of snow.

So quiet, so eerie, that you feel shivers go up and down your spine, and not ones from cold.

It’s daytime, at least.

“Alright, we stick together,” Lucas says seriously.

“Okay, I don’t think we can make that a hard and fast rule –“

“Dustin, I swear to God, we’re staying together unless the universe literally pulls us all apart –“

“Fine!”

You roll your eyes and walk up to Jane, who smiles a little at you. You wrap your arm around her shoulders and she nestles her head against you, possibly for warmth, because her cheek feels cold.

“How are you?” you ask seriously, shivering as a wind blows past you all.

You’re all dressed in an eclectic mess of layering because you needed to pack light but also for approximately ten different climates. Sweatshirts on sweaters on t-shirts on tanks, with gloves that have no fingers and scarves wrapped around your heads.

Between that and looking – rightfully so – like you were living out of a car, you looked fairly homeless. Homeless teenagers, traveling America.

Looking for psychics.

“I’m cold,” Jane answers simply, “Cold and tired.”

“Yeah, me too,” you sigh, “But hopefully we’ll find Rivka soon.”

She nods, “Soon.”

“I promise, I won’t say a word.”

Jane laughs, a musical sound that always makes warmth spread from your head to your toes to your fingers.

“It’s okay, Mike. He was... difficult.”

You smile at her, “Yeah. Difficult.”

“I don’t remember a lot,” Jane then murmurs, stepping over snowy logs as you all follow through the woods, “From my time.”

“Yeah,” you agree softly.

“But... I dunno. I remember him always using his powers to get things to go his way. So. I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at you.”

“It’s alright Jane,” you reassure, kissing her on the side of her head as

you keep moving through the woods, “It was discouraging. You had every right to be mad.”

She smiles back at you and you keep walking, the snow starting to fall more around you all as you make your way through even denser forest.

The fluttering of wings goes past you, suddenly, and you shout in alarm.

“Mike?” Jane says, whirling around and looking all over.

“Guys, I heard a twig snap –“

“It’s probably just an animal or something –“

Jane closes her eyes and you watch her nervously, heart pounding more and more.

She opens them again and starts walking forward more, just walking as fast as you can. You follow her, the snow picking up as it falls all around you all.

“It’s freezing,” Max mutters, “I hate this.”

“See, you’re at a disadvantage in this party for being a Californian –“

“I swear, every winter you rub that in...”

“Come on,” Jane mutters, “Shush. We’re getting close.”

Everyone looks at each other nervously before following Jane, who has pressed on deeper into the forest. The trees are so close together that you feel almost sick, like you can’t move.

But you keep following her.

Another twig snaps.

Dustin whirls around.

“Uh...”

“Dustin, *shush!*”

“No, uh... *guys...*”

You turn around too, and see –

“BEAR!” Lucas screams, and he takes off sprinting. Max follows after him, and so does Dustin. Will trips over a log and you run to help him up, but Jane has remained still.

“JANE!” you scream.

She’s just facing the bear, glaring at it.

The bear rears up onto its hind limbs, its arm rearing up, paw outstretched –“

“JANE!” you scream again, and you tackle her out of the way, the two of you diving into the snow.

“THIRTEEN! COME OUT!” Jane screams, “ITS ME, ELEVEN!”

The bear lands on its forelimbs without warning, bowing its head.

You three look on in confusion as a figure emerges from behind the bear.

She is wearing layer after layer, just like you three, with her head wrapped up in cloth and a ratty skirt hanging down to her knees. She’s small and skinny, like wires coming out of her instead of arms and legs. Her hair is long, dark brown, and ringlet-curly.

She unwraps her cloth from her head and looks at you all, frowning.

“E...leven?”

“Eleven,” Jane whispers, “Eleven. Your sister.”

She frowns more, walking straight up to Jane and pulling her by the arm. Jane yelps in pain, but Rivka looks down at her wrist, seeing the number there.

She pulls back the clothing on her own wrist to show the **013** written

there.

“Sister,” Rivka murmurs, “You... found me.”

“Yes,” Jane breathes, “I did.”

Rivka throws her arms around Jane, hugging her tightly. Jane hugs her back and pulls her up, helping her return her bundling to her face and body.

Rivka walks wordlessly over to the bear and heaves herself onto it, sitting down and riding the bear forward. You watch in awe as she then climbs up a tree, using the bear as a base point, and Jane frowns after her.

“What are you doing –“

She comes back down, hopping into the snow, brushing it and pine needles off of her arms.

“Others are that way,” she points, and she gets back on the bear, walking forward to them.

“Oh geez,” you grown, “I’ll go get them –“

You take off sprinting into the woods, following the path of knocked over branches and twigs, until you see Lucas, Dustin, and Max all huddled in a clearing, looking terrified.

“Mike you’re okay –“ Dustin shouts, running towards you.

“Yeah, the bear was *Rivka’s*,” you say, shaking your head in utter bemusement, “What part of *she can communicate with animals* was lost on you all?”

Max frowns heavily and Lucas sighs.

“Fair point.”

The others reach you all, Jane and Will now on the bear with Rivka. They all get down, Rivka walking up to you all.

“Rivka?” Rivka asks, walking up to you all and frowning more, the wrappings off of her head.

“Uh...” you swallow.

“It’s your name,” Jane murmurs, “Your real name.”

“Thirteen...?”

“That’s not your name,” Jane shakes her head, “It’s your number.”

Rivka frowns.

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you know where we come from?” Jane asks softly, looking upset. Rivka shakes her head.

“Hoo boy,” Dustin groans.

“Shut up,” Will mutters.

Jane takes Rivka farther away, sitting down with her on some logs. The bear stands next to you, looming, and you are terrified of looking at it for too long.

“So that snow is coming down even more,” Max grumbles, looking up at it.

“You’ll survive –“

“I don’t give a shit about *me*, knucklehead, I give a shit about the *car*.”

“Oh,” Lucas groans.

“Isn’t it... equipped for snow?” Dustin asks, frowning.

“Probably? But I don’t *know* because we got it in *California*,” Max shakes her head, “We should have taken a different car –“

“We didn’t *have* a different car to *take!*”

“We’ll figure it out,” you say firmly, though you’re nervous too.

You don’t feel like being in two car crashes in one year.

“We’ll drive *slowly* and get *behind schedule* –“

“We don’t *need* a schedule,” Dustin points out, “We already are going to miss the beginning of school...”

“This seems like an awful plan,” Lucas mutters.

“Do you have a better one?” you ask, glaring.

“Wait for the snow to pass?”

“We *cannot* –“

You look over at Jane as the rest of them continue to argue, watching as she talks with the younger, tinier girl.

You watch as they talk for a long, long time. You only hear snippets of the conversation – from things about the Bad Men, to things about their powers, to where Jane came from, to even some things about the Mind Falyer, though not a lot.

Not everything.

The girl looks scared.

You don’t want to screw this one up like you did the last one, but you also don’t know what to do.

She reminds you too much of Jane when you first found her.

So small, so young, so confused, so lost.

You find yourself drawn over there, grimacing because you know you should stay away. But you walk over anyway, hanging back awkwardly.

Rivka looks over at you rapidly, eyes widening at your presence.

“That’s Mike,” Jane whispers, “He’s the one who found me. When I

left.”

She nods, running her fingers through her hair.

“Do you understand everything I’ve said?” Jane asks quietly.

Rivka nods again.

“So... do you want to come back with us? We can teach you... everything,” Jane offers, smiling a little.

Rivka looks around – at the bickering friends, at you, at Jane, at the bear.

She frowns.

“Alayia...”

“Alayia?”

She points at the bear.

“She comes too?”

Jane’s eyes widen.

“Uh...”

“Normally people don’t have bears,” you say softly, grimacing.

Rivka folds her arms tightly across her chest.

“No. I don’t go without Alayia.”

Jane sighs.

“Alright.”

“But –“ you say, your stomach clenching in horror for Jane.

Jane glares at you.

“She doesn’t want to come back, so she doesn’t have to. You know

that.”

You sigh.

“Yeah, I know.”

Rivka looks back and forth at you both.

“Why should I come?”

Jane smiles a little, “Because we’re family. And you can shower. And eat real food. And talk to other people. And learn about everything. And be safe.”

You don’t say anything about the Mind Flayer.

“I can’t leave Alayia,” Rivka murmurs, holding her hands on her knees, “She needs me. I need her.”

“Okay,” Jane nods, “Stay safe, alright?”

Rivka nods.

Jane gets up and starts walking back through the forest wordlessly, and you take off after her, looking back at Rivka.

She just watches you all go with wide eyes.

“Jane?” you ask softly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she mutters quietly.

“Alright...”

You all keep walking, following Jane’s angry path through the woods, until you reach the car again.

Dustin gets into the driver’s seat without a word and you take off together, driving through the snow, towards the west.

“Jane?” you ask softly again, reaching out for her hand. She looks up at you, not saying a word.

“Do you want a hug?” you offer. Jane nods, and you hold her tightly against her, as she starts to cry into your chest.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Will asks seriously, looking over at you in worry.

You sigh.

“I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“How long has she been on her own?” Max asks from the front, holding up the map to her face.

“Three years,” Jane murmurs, “She escaped the lab when I did. Used animals to get as far away from people as she could.”

“Wow,” Dustin whispers.

“She must have gone a different way than you did, then,” Lucas mutters.

Jane just shrugs, staring out the window.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t get her to stay,” you whisper.

Jane shrugs, swallowing.

“I understand. She has her animals. They are easier to understand.”

You want to question after that more, but you all just keep driving.

You spend most of the rest of the day resting your face in Jane’s hair, Dustin and Max switching driving at various rest stops.

It hasn’t stopped snowing.

And, soon enough, it’s getting harder and harder to see your surroundings.

“So this is a slight problem,” Dustin says in a squeaky, high-pitched voice, his grip white on the steering wheel.

“Uh oh,” Max whispers.

“Um... what do we do? I mean, what do we *do*?” Lucas asks, running his fingers through his hair and looking around at the snow.

“I think we pull over,” you say, your hand numb from how tightly Jane is gripping it.

“But –“

“*Pull over!*”

Dustin slowly pulls over to the side of the road and you park, the snow swirling madly around you all. He gets out and clears some snow from the car – from the tail pipe, from the windows, from everywhere – and brings the things from the trunk into the back, throwing them onto your laps.

“Okay *now* what do we do?” Will asks, his eyes wide next to you.

“Um...”

“I shouldn’t waste gas by keeping the engine running but who knows when this storm will let up,” Dustin groans.

“We did bring some extra tanks of gas–“ Max reminds.

“Do we really want to burn through all of our supply?” Lucas points out.

“Probably not, but I’m not sure we have another choice,” you whisper.

You all look at each other in terror.

“Well, if this is it, I’m glad I knew you guys,” Dustin says firmly, “Love you all like my family –“

“Stop being dramatic, Dustin,” Lucas groans, “We’ll leave the engine running for now and just... wait.”

Will gulps next to you, but you do that, keeping the heat on low and just sitting in the car, watching the snow pick up around you. Occasionally Dustin will go clear off tail pipe again, or will put snow

into the water jugs you brought with so you can drink.

It's quiet.

Everyone's too on edge to talk.

Jane's brow is furrowed in concentration and you look over at her worriedly, reaching out for her hand.

"Jane?"

"I'm thinking."

"But –"

"Mike, I just remembered!" Dustin shouts, making everyone jump.

"Can you try to see when the storm ends?"

"Weather is *ridiculously unpredictable*, Dustin, I'd rather not get everyone's hopes up."

"Oh, right."

Silence descends over the group again, just the sound of the engine running as the snow and wind billows around you. You rest against Jane, trying to close your eyes and rest, though you know it's actually sometime in the afternoon and you probably could stay awake.

"I wish we had food," Dustin sighs after a while.

"Yeah..."

"Next rest stop we stock up?"

"If we *get* to a rest stop..."

"Lucas, stop it," Max snaps.

"Look, I'm just being realistic –"

"No, you're being *nihilistic*!"

"Guys, the gas is getting low," Dustin mutters, interrupting the bickering.

"Okay?"

"We should tough it out for a bit."

"Everyone bundle up. Get out the blankets," Lucas orders.

You all climb over each other to grab your varying warming objects, from sweatshirts to blankets, draping them over you all. You wrap your arms tightly around Jane, trying to keep her warm with your own body heat.

She presses her face into your neck and you just squeeze her tighter.

Now it's getting late enough that you feel like you're going to fall asleep, and you start to, your face buried in her hair.

"I'm going to heat up the car for a minute," Dustin whispers, turning on the ignition. The warm air fills you up and wakes you a little, before it ends – not that soon, but sooner than you'd like.

"It looks like the snow is slowing down," Lucas whispers.

"Yeah, but we want it to stop before we keep going," Dustin grumbles, "I'm going back to my nap."

You all keep sleeping, drifting in and out between a terrified consciousness and a not very restful sleepiness.

"I hope Rivka is okay," Jane whispers softly.

"Me too," you murmur back, your voice slow and slurred together from sleepiness, but you squeeze her tighter anyway.

"I just... I wish I could have... told her... or proved to her... that it was better... to come back with me," Jane snuffles, wiping her tears off on her gloves.

"I know, Jane. I wish you could have too. But change is scary," you mumble.

“Yeah,” Jane sighs, “I... know.”

You squeeze her again, just holding as tightly as you can as the wind continues to rage, but the snow seems to slow down.

You fall asleep again, and by the time you wake up, you realize the car is moving again.

“Wha –“

“The snow’s gone down enough for me to have visibility,” Dustin says groggily, “I’m hitting the road until we find a freaking rest stop.”

“Is it safe?” Jane asks worriedly.

“Safer than sitting still I think,” Dustin pauses, “We’re hungry and thirsty. And I swear to God, if I have to pee in the snow again – anyways, I think there should be one soon.”

He keeps driving, and you all sit nervously, you refusing to let go of Jane. You look over and see that Lucas and Max are holding each other’s hands across the front seat – back seat divide.

Eventually Dustin manages to pull into a gas station, the rest of you all scrambling inside to the 24 hour diner. Dustin is refilling the car with gas, not even really saying anything as he does so.

Lucas starts to order food, his emergency credit card in his hands, as you and the rest find a booth. Will and Max sleep on each other’s shoulders while you turn back to Jane.

“Are you okay?”

She nods, looking frozen, and planting her head in your neck.

Lucas bringing back food is the best thing that’s happened all night.

DECEMBER 22 1986

You know that the new day had started sometime during the great snowstorm, but you don’t know exactly when.

You just know that you all ate and napped a little in the diner before heading back out, driving further through South Dakota, making your way down to the reservation.

Eventually you pull into the territory, everything around you looking both different and familiar.

“Where does she live?” Lucas asks tiredly, bags visible under his eyes.

“Turn left,” Jane murmurs softly, directing Max as she drives through the Reservation.

Eventually you turn down a street with trailers lining the road, and you pull up to one of them, Jane getting out of the car and walking through the snow. You want to follow her, but you don’t know if you should – not after all the other times.

“Go after her, man,” Will whispers.

You look over at him and frown.

“She needs you.”

You nod, getting out of the car and walking up to the trailer with Jane.

She smiles weakly at you and kisses your forehead, walking up to the door and knocking.

Words in a language you don’t understand are shouted back at you.

“It’s Eleven,” Jane says, frowning, “Eleven.”

The door opens.

A girl around your sister’s age, with long straight black hair and darkly tanned skin walks out of the trailer. She’s wearing almost entirely leather – leather pants, leather jacket, red shirt underneath. She holds a gun in her hand, and her face is twisted into a glare.

“Eleven? Prove it then.”

Jane holds up her arm, showing the number on her sleeve.

The girl looks up and back at Jane's face, frowning more.

She holds up her own number.

007

"You do look like her... and who's this idiot?"

You grimace.

"A newcomer."

"Newcomer?"

"I have powers. I was not in the Lab with you all. It's a long story."

The girl looks at you two again for a while.

"You better come inside."

You all walk together into the trailer, the girl locking the door quickly behind you.

"I know you think of me as Seven, but my name's –"

"Wiconi," Jane answers softly.

"How do you know that?"

Jane sighs.

"I saw your file."

"Oh good. Tell me, they know I'm here, right?" Wiconi asks seriously.

"Yeah," Jane nods, "But they're not looking for you."

"Good," Wiconi grins, "Got too scared. I like that."

Jane grins a little back at her.

"You look tough, Eleven. What is your real name?" Wiconi asks, putting the gun down at the table and grabbing food from her pantry.

"Jane."

"Jane. Suits you."

"What do you remember of me?" Jane asks seriously.

Wiconi frowns, crossing her very well muscled arms in front of her chest.

"I remember you were sweet. I remember you hated it when Eight and I fought."

"Kali," Jane murmurs.

"Ah so you've already found her? What are you doing here, anyway? I'm assuming from your decent length hair and relative ability to speak in full sentences that you aren't fresh out of the closet –"

"I... long story," Jane sighs.

Wiconi raises an eyebrow and turns to you.

"What about you, newbie-boy? Care to say the long story?"

"Jane opened up a portal to another dimension," you say bluntly, shrugging, "Shit happened after that."

"Another *dimension*? Shit," Wiconi frowns, "Is it at least better than ours?"

"Nope, it has a monster that wants to kill us all," you say.

"Oh lovely."

"The monster stole my friend Will, Jane escaped the Lab, she helped us find Will, but then she had to go into hiding 'cause the goons from the Department of Energy were chasing after her, but then the monster came back, so Jane left hiding, but first she found Kali, and then she came back and defeated it and she got a deal so she could

live in the world, and then we had to deal with the fact that we both had depression for two years and she had repressed memories. The monster took advantage of that because turns out he wasn't fully gone and now we're gathering all of her psychic siblings, partly because she finally isn't repressing anymore, partly because we need help fighting off the monster for good because he's going to come back. Oh, and I got powers because I'm her boyfriend and, fun fact, we all have a bunch of bacteria inside of us, and that's how you guys have powers in the first place," you summarize.

Wiconi frowns, nodding.

"Alright then. Not the weirdest story I've ever heard, or been tangentially connected to."

"So you believe him?" Jane asks desperately.

"Course I do. You can't make that shit up," Wiconi pauses, "And the repressed memories is pretty much par for the course."

"Did you repress?" Jane asks softly.

"Fuck no, but the only other siblings I still know where they are did. Fumiko and Renee – Three and Five – contacted me after a while when they finally had to face the fact that we were poked, prodded, experimented on, and had our junk touched our whole lives. It's fucked up and so much fun," Wiconi rolls her eyes, "Why *else* am I nineteen year old slumming it and chugging alcohol every fucking day? Dishonor to my damn ancestors, I swear..."

"Will you help us?" Jane asks, her face twisted with desperation, "I've already talked to Rivka, Craig, and Terry –"

"Numbers, Jane, I don't know all of our real names like you do, lucky jerk."

Jane grins a little before continuing, "Nine, Ten, and Thirteen."

"Okay well you should have known Thirteen wouldn't have come back. She talks better with animals than people. Remember her rabbit?"

“I *do*,” Jane breathes, “Right –“

“She would just sit in a corner with that thing and we never got two words out of her –“

“Well, the rest of us could only really say... two... words...”

“Fair point. And as for ten, he’s a fucking paranoid. Lemme guess, you found him under even more security than me even though he completely faked his identity?” Wiconi asks, chugging some of her beer.

“Yeah,” Jane sighs.

“Nine is a bummer though, sorry about him.”

“But will you help?” Jane repeats.

“I’ll absolutely help,” Wiconi pauses, “But I won’t come back with you. Not right away.”

Jane’s face falls.

“Look, Jane, I’ve got business to take care of here. I’ve been tracking down some fucking goons of Papa’s for like, a damn year,” Wiconi explains, “I don’t want to stop now. I have to take them down.”

Jane sighs and nods.

“And besides that, you say that the monster is *coming* back – not that he’s *come* back. So I have some time,” Wiconi continues.

Jane nods again.

“And, finally, I’ve seen that car you pulled up in. It’s crowded with a bunch of other kids and I’m not in the mood for that in the snow,” Wiconi shakes her head, “Sounds suicidal, no offense.”

“It’s... an adventure,” you admit.

“Exactly,” Wiconi pauses, “Look, keep in touch with me. Those goons know where I am and they know I can fight them off for literally

forever, so I don't care about giving you my phone number."

She scrawls it on a piece of paper and hands it to Jane.

"This isn't a failure, sis. I promise. Tell you what, you guys can stay here with me tonight. The snow should pick up again and frankly I don't want to be responsible for the death of six teenagers through willful neglect –"

Jane jumps up and hugs her, and Wiconi hugs her back tightly, before she runs out to get the others from the car.

The trailer is packed with you all in there, but it's not as packed as the car, and it feels good to stretch your legs. Wiconi hands you all beers, sitting back on the counter, her leg tucked up under her chin.

"So, welcome to my humble house," Wiconi introduces, "This is all there is. Care to introduce yourselves and explain *why* my little sister is traveling *only* with other irresponsible teenagers?"

"I am very responsible," Lucas protests, glaring.

"I don't doubt it, but, ya know, Jane's reminding me I have an actual family and shit," Wiconi rolls her eyes.

"Aren't you back on your reservation because you returned to your family?" Will asks in confusion.

"I'm back here 'cause this is where I'm from, wastoid. My parents were both killed for trying to get me back. Very tragic, yadda yadda yadda," Wiconi rolls her eyes, "I'm not here for therapy with fifteen year olds."

"Right well I'm Dustin," Dustin introduces eagerly, "Will, Mike, Lucas and I were best friends when Will disappeared –"

"Slow the fuck down, curly top," Wiconi laughs, "I know the basic story. Which one of you is Will?"

Will raises his hand.

"Gotcha. How are you doing being dragged into a psychic-generated

mess?”

Jane’s face falls.

“It’s not her fault,” Will snaps, looking furious.

“Fine, fine, it’s not her fault. US Government generated mess, then?” Wiconi rectifies.

“I’ve been better,” Will responds irritably.

“I’m Lucas,” Lucas introduces, eager to change the subject.

“Responsible Man,” Wiconi laughs. Lucas sticks his tongue out at her.

“I’m Max. Dustin and Lucas got crushes on me and decided to drag me into the Apocalypse Brigade,” Max groans, “I regret a lot of things.”

“Hey!” Lucas protests.

“Not you, stalker.”

“Awww, that’s creepy!” Wiconi cheers, “So I have a very important question.”

“Yeah?” you ask, frowning.

“How the *hell* did you develop powers by being Jane’s *boyfriend*?”

“Oh man let me tell you about the microbiome!” Dustin cheers, immediately launching into a detailed explanation while Wiconi watches in fascination.

You look over at Jane, who’s face is still down. You reach over and press her gently on the tip of her nose.

“Boop,” you whisper quietly.

She immediately perks up, reaching over and pressing you back on the nose.

“Boop,” she giggles.

“Well fuck. Good thing I’ve only made out with about twenty different guys,” Wiconi laughs.

“Really?” Max asks, her eyes wide.

“No, idiot, I haven’t made out with anyone. What part of my current persona indicates time for dating?” Wiconi pauses, “Besides, I’m like, ninety nine percent sure I’m a lesbian, so no thanks.”

“Well, if you ever meet the perfect girl, be sure to warn her that your kiss carries magical powers,” Dustin jokes.

“*Possibly* carries. You said yourself Jane was overloaded. I’m not surprised though,” Wiconi lights up a cigarette and blows it out into the trailer, “You were ridiculously overpowered when we were all kids.”

“I was?” Jane asks curiously.

“The number of times my shit was just floating in midair and you weren’t even concentrating, you were just playing around... very irritating, Janey. Very irritating.”

“Tell us more kid Jane stories!” Max asks eagerly, “Ones that aren’t about being isolated or sexual assault.”

“Hmm,” Wiconi pauses, “Well alright. I remember once when we were being given playtime in the rainbow room – all of us, really, it was a nightmare, there’s a reason we mostly played in smaller groups – Janey was *super* little. Like, probably four or something. And Six was fucking picking on her because Six is a dick –“

“Eric,” Jane answers softly.

“Ah, ‘course you know. Eric, whatever. Eric can turn invisible, and he would keep turning invisible, and then popping up behind Janey, and Janey would freak out –“

“Oh *right*,” Jane groans.

“So once Kali and I decided to trick Eric. I couldn’t do much of anything because turns out psychic healing powers aren’t very

effective for pulling pranks, but I did distract Eric by egging him on while Kali suddenly made him see a bunch of centipedes and shit swarm him. We didn't know what they were called but occasionally one would get into our rooms and they were creepy as fuck. Anyways, he freaked the fuck out, Kali got in trouble, but Janey had a laugh," Wiconi grins.

"Meeting Eric should be fun," Will groans.

"Nah, he's just as fucked up as the rest of us. Don't blame him for not knowing how to behave. Its not like making a kid see a bunch of centipedes is particularly good behavior either," Wiconi pauses, "Cut us all some slack, ya know?"

Jane frowns more.

"Jane?"

She looks up at Wiconi.

"Sorry –"

"You clearly have a counterpoint to that," Wiconi points out, looking at her kindly, "What's up kid?"

"Kali... made me see Papa. So that I would stay with her," Jane whispers, "And wouldn't stop making me see him even when I asked her not to. It's only when I forced her out of my head..."

Wiconi sighs.

"That's pretty fucked up."

"Am I supposed to cut her slack?" Jane asks softly.

"I think you misunderstand what I mean by cutting slack," Wiconi responds immediately, "I don't mean like, willingly let yourself get hurt. I mean do no harm but take no shit. Let all of us figure out what we want and how to deal with you coming into our lives, patiently, but also don't let us awalk all over you. And you really need to fucking tell Kali she was a bitch."

Jane nods, looking scared.

“She’s just your sister. And you are telekinetic. You can handle her.”

“I know, just...” Jane sighs, “I left... under weird terms. It’s going to be an uncomfortable moment.”

Wiconi frowns.

“I wish I could come back with you, Jane, I just don’t think it’s possible. Your car can’t fit me, for one, and for two, I’m waiting for some... friends... to stop by,” Wiconi grins a little.

“Friends?” Lucas asks.

“Well, government goons trying to take me in, but, ya know,” Wiconi picks up her gun and winks, “I’ve got a present for them.”

Will gulps.

“I only kill people who are trying to take me back to that hellhole, Will,” Wiconi murmurs softly, “No one else. It’s self-defense.”

“Do you antagonize them, though?” Dustin asks seriously.

“I just live. Whether or not that’s antagonistic is their business,” Wiconi shrugs, “So tell me more about this monster.”

You all spend most of the night talking together, before Wiconi lets you all kip out in the trailer, which is much better than sleeping in the car like the night before. You seriously appreciate the chance to lie down.

D E C E M B E R 23 1986

You’re woken up in the middle of the night by pounding on the door.

You jump up quickly, watching in terror as Wiconi walks past you, stepping over you and all your friends.

You hold her ankle.

She whirls around and glares at you.

You shake your head rapidly, before closing your eyes.

Void.

Look.

Future.

“Two men,” you whisper, “Police men.”

“I know that –“

“They have automatic guns,” you continue, swallowing, “Big ones. Ones you can’t fight.”

Waconi’s eyes widen in the dark.

Jane gets up, then, looking with determination.

“Jane –“ Wiconi hisses, but she walks past her.

She then holds up her hand, and pushes the door off of its hinges into the two men.

They shout out in pain and you can hear them land father away. You follow Jane in shock as She stands in the entryway to the trailer, folding her arms over her chest and glaring down at the two of them.

They’re groaning in pain, clearly crushed by the door, as snow starts to fall more around you all.

“Jane,” Wiconi hisses, “What are you *doing?*”

“Defending you,” Jane mutters softly, “Kill them.”

Wiconi nods, walking up to both of them and shooting them each in the head.

The shots ring out in the quiet night.

No one from the other trailers seem to question it, though maybe they just knew what Wiconi was up to.

Wiconi turns back to you both, frowning a little.

“They’re going to send more heat on me now. I knew this was coming, but I didn’t think it would be this soon –“

“What are you going to do?” Jane asks seriously.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Wiconi says, “Make them question their intel. Then come back, eventually.”

“Come with us,” Max interjects seriously, “We’re going all around the country. No better way to lose a trail.”

“Plus, we could use a healer,” Lucas adds.

Wiconi laughs slightly.

“I don’t want to put you all in danger.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re all in danger already,” you point out, “We have to break kids out of labs.”

Wiconi frowns, and nods.

“Let me pack and get my car ready. Some of you can ride with me if you want to make the other car less... packed.”

You all help Wiconi pack her car, the snow falling heavily around you.

“The only downside to this plan,” Wiconi grunts as she shoves some clothes into the trunk, “Is that my car is a hunk of junk. It’s why I counted it out in the first place. But apparently I have to go regardless now.”

“How much of a hunk of junk are we talking?” Dustin asks.

“It doesn’t have power steering. We’re in for a fun ride.”

“I’ll ride with you,” Jane murmurs, “If worst comes to worst I could probably intervene.”

“Counting on it.”

"Dustin, Lucas and I will ride together to lead the way. We have the walkies right? We can talk on the road," Max says.

"Yup," Will holds his up.

"Alright well I don't want many more of you kids in the car with me on the off chance we have to split up –"

"I'll go with Jane," you say firmly.

Will rolls his eyes and shakes his head, "I'll stick in our car."

You all pile in as the sun starts to rise, the grey sky lightening behind it as snow continues to fall.

"Follow our lead!" Lucas shouts. Jane gets in the front of the car with Wiconi, as you sit in the back, looking around at the torn upholstery and strange stain.

Max takes off in a flash and Wiconi follows her just as fast, driving rapidly through the reservation, and out to Montana.

"So who's next on this fun adventure?" Wiconi asks after you've been on the highway for a while, the snow still picking up around you all.

"Tarek... Two."

"Two?"

"Two."

"Fuck."

"What's wrong with Tarek?" you ask seriously.

"Nothing's *wrong* with him. He just can *teleport*. If Craig and Terry were skittish –"

"Tarek will be extra skittish?"

"Exactly," Wiconi nods, "You gotta warn him before we get there."

"I don't see that going well. If anything it made Terry *more* freaked

out,” you point out.

“Yeah, well, maybe don’t bring the newbie around.”

Jane turns to look at you in fear, and you nod in encouragement.

“You can do this, Jane.”

She leans over and kisses you, making Wiconi fake-gag.

“Teenage soulmates or not,” she says, “Kid, if you hurt my little sis after all she’s been through –“

“As far as I’m concerned, if *you* hurt my *girlfriend* after all she’s been through –“

“Fair point.”

Jane shushes you both and closes her eyes, you reaching out to hold her hand. The car is silent as she slips into the Void.

Eventually, she jolts back to your plane.

“He knows,” she whispers.

“Is he okay with it?”

“He wants to see us,” Jane says, nodding, “You too.”

Wiconi grins, “Good. Missed that goober.”

“Can I ask a question?” you throw out, frowning.

“Sure, Mike.”

“Can you... find people in your head? Like Jane?”

“Nah. But if I’ve found someone I can talk to them again. We all can.”

You nod, “That’s what I thought. Why couldn’t you find Jane after you spent your life with her?”

“Look man, after a certain amount of time, the length of time since

we talked means I basically have lost them, ya know? Jane changed, I changed. We needed to reconnect. But now we've found each other again, and that should last. I think the longest amount of time that's past that I've needed to reestablish contact is two months. But that's why I gave the phone number... before we cut town," Wiconi explains.

"So I have to maintain the connection every two months?" Jane asks softly.

"Well, yeah. Usually just means making a phone call."

"But they listen to our phones," you point out.

"Please, they don't have the tech to listen to every phone. 'S long as we're hidden in other ways, they aren't listening."

A long silence follows as you keep following the car ahead of you, driving through Montana, the snow silent and non blinding around you all.

"Man I can't wait to kick Kali's ass," Wiconi says after a while.

"Wh...y?" Jane asks, frowning.

"Because she knows full well that Papa is a fucking low blow for all of us," Wiconi grunts.

Jane sighs heavily.

"I could have handled it, if... if it wasn't worse for me."

"Yeah, you had to stick with him after the lab was split up, right? Man that must have sucked, staying in Hawkins –"

"That's not why," you say, before you cover your mouth in horror.

"It's alright, Mike," Jane murmurs, "It's alright."

She takes a deep breath, and you reach out to grip her hand, and she grips yours tightly.

“Papa raped me. Not long after you all left.”

“*Fuck.*”

“Yeah...”

“Well we don’t have to talk about it more. I understand not wanting to. Just, shit. Shit. I’m sorry, Jane. I’m sorry.”

Jane nods, and she holds her face in her hands and starts sobbing.

“Fuck,” Wiconi groans, “This is my fault – Mike call the goobers, tell them we’re taking the nearest rest stop so I can just talk with Jane for a while.”

You nod and you tell them, all of you pulling over soon. You get out of the car while Wiconi and Jane talk, walking over to the others.

“So?” Max asks, popping her bubble gum, “Is she behaving decently?”

“Yeah,” you nod, “I have a good feeling about her.”

“Excellent,” Lucas sighs, “I’m glad we have an actual adult with us now.”

“She’s nineteen –“

“That counts!”

“Barely,” Dustin snorts, “She’s essentially in our age group.”

“You think *Nancy* is in our age group?”

“Well... I guess not. But close.”

Everyone keeps bickering for a while, you sort of tuning it out and watching as Wiconi talks to Jane in the car. Jane is still crying, and it breaks your heart so much.

You just want to help her.

Wiconi looks up and sees you looking, and she waves you over, a

reassuring smile on her face.

You sprint over to the car and dive to the back seat, but Jane gets out before you can, getting up and throwing her arms around you. You hold her tightly, waiting until she stops crying, as Wiconi gets out and looks at you both.

“I think you’ll be okay with this family around you, Jane,” Wiconi murmurs, “I think you’ve got it covered.”

Jane hiccups and laughs, looking up at you and kissing you deeply. You squeak in surprise, before pulling away and beaming down at her.

“You’re ridiculous,” Jane laughs.

“You’re ridiculous,” you answer softly, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Alright, enough of this. Let’s stock up and get back on the road,” Wiconi says, rolling her eyes.

You keep driving, talking and laughing with her in the car, until you pull into Missoula, Montana.

“Do you kids have like, money?” Wiconi asks, all of you driving up to a crappy little motel in the center of the town.

“Some,” Max says, grimacing, “We’re mostly living off of credit cards at the moment.”

“That’s lovely,” Wiconi rolls her eyes, “Well I have some. I can’t completely bankroll you all but I’ll help a little bit. Least I can do and all.”

This motel, you find yourself in a suite all together to cut costs, but you hold Jane tightly in one of the beds, refusing to let go of her.

You’re glad Wiconi is coming along after all.

DECEMBER 24 1986

You head out early to find Tarek, going through the smaller town and driving over to his house. It's fairly small, but the cleanest house you've seen yet, with a well manicured garden in the front.

Jane knocks on the door, hopping on her toes. The door opens, and a tall, skinny man walks out – with tattoos all over his arms and neck. He wears a t-shirt and jeans, and has tanned skin and shiny black hair. His glasses are thick, and his beard is short, trimmed close to the face.

“Eleven?” he asks seriously, his voice tinged with the slightest of English accents.

She holds up her hand, showing the number.

He holds up his.

002

Visible only slightly beneath all the other markings.

Wiconi walks up from behind Jane, showing hers as well.

“Alright,” Tarek nods, “Come in, quickly.”

Everyone files into the house and sits around a small dining table, looking expectantly as the three of them watch each other.

“I assume you're here for a reason?” Tarek asks, leaning his head on his hands, “Not that I don't appreciate the family reunion.”

“A monster wants to destroy our world, Tarek,” Jane whispers, “We need all the help we can get.”

Tarek nods, running his hands through his hair and pacing around the room.

“I'm just... confused. Why you think *I* can help,” Tarek mutters.

“Look, two – sorry – Tarek,” Wiconi corrects herself, “You're the oldest. You know full damn well you're the natural leader of us all.”

Tarek glares at her, “I am not. Looks like Eleven –“

“Jane,” Jane whispers.

“Sorry, *Jane* is the leader here. I’ve never been decent at that. Remember when Five wanted to orchestrate a break out and deferred to *me* on how to do that?” Tarek rolls his eyes, “It went as well as you remember.”

Wiconi scowls.

“Can you at least help? You might be able to teleport away from a bad situation and escape,” Jane begs, “And warn other people...”

Tarek sighs again.

“Kid, look, I love you, and I’m glad we’ve all found each other again. Like, this is a good thing you’re doing here. But... it just doesn’t seem like a good idea to me. For me to come back with you. The more of us you have in one group, the more chances the government will find us. And, to be frank, I have a good life here.”

“What do you do?” Dustin asks curiously.

Tarek grins, “I’m a tattoo artist. Extremely fun career, let me tell you. Especially when idiots don’t know how to spell, or what words mean in different languages.”

“Oh I can only imagine,” Max grins, “That sounds... like a great way to fuck with people.”

“We all rebel in our own ways. Do you guys want some breakfast?”

You eat breakfast with him and leave immediately afterwards. He was a kind guy, but clearly not interested in coming with. Jane is clearly discouraged and nervous.

After all, Kali is next.

DECEMBER 25 1986

Christmas.

Your least favorite day of the year.

Well, one of them.

And you were finally driving up through San Francisco.

Jane hadn't talked since you left Boise, Idaho the night before for your latest motel stay, so nervous that she was rendered mute. You just held her and comforted her as much as you could, while Dustin would try to cheer her up with jokes (having joined you all in this car).

"Look, I'll say it for the thirtieth time," Wiconi says from the driver's seat, frowning, "If she pulls anything, I'll kick her ass."

Jane doesn't say anything, just stares out the window.

"I just think she's overwhelmed, Wiconi," Dustin says seriously, "We just have to let her get through this on her own."

"Yeah," Wiconi sighs, "Yeah. Poor Jane."

Jane makes a sound of annoyance.

"Jane?" you whisper.

"Don't pity me," she mutters.

"She speaks!" Wiconi cheers.

"Shut up, Wiconi," Jane sighs, "I just... needed to... collect myself."

"It's alright, talking's hard for you from time to time," you murmur, patting her shoulder.

Jane rolls her eyes, but kisses you on the cheek, shaking her head silently.

You pull up to an abandoned warehouse, all parking outside of it and heading up to the door.

Jane takes a deep breath, looks at you nervously, and then knocks on the door.

The door wrenches open.

A girl only a few years older than you all looks at you. She has dark skin and black hair, dyed slightly purple, messy all around her face. She has makeup like Jane usually does, torn jeans, and a leather jacket.

“Jane,” she whispers quietly.

“Kali,” Jane responds just as softly.

“Come in, I guess,” Kali mutters, opening the door more and letting all of you in.

The warehouse is fairly empty, with Kali wandering around and throwing some wood in a trashcan fire, sitting down on the concrete ground and frowning.

“What brings you here? I figured I’d never see you again.”

Jane swallows.

“That was... my original plan. Yes.”

“Fuck you too, Jane,” Kali mutters.

“Kali –“

“Fuck you too! Fuck you too! You know what, I don’t have to talk to you about this,” Kali stands up, pacing the room angrily, “Or about anything!”

“Kali you are *way* out of line here,” Wiconi says, stepping forward.

Kali looks at her with a frown.

“S... Seven?”

Wiconi holds up her arm, and Kali returns the gesture.

008

“Go by Wiconi now,” she says, glaring, “And I know that you weren’t

innocent in you and Jane parting ways.”

“For fuck’s sake –“

“You listen to me, Kali, you fucking listen to me,” Wiconi walks up to her and grabs her by the front of her shirt, “Do you realize how *fucked up* it is to make *any one* of us see Papa?”

“I was desperate –“

“Not a damn excuse, Kali!”

Kali wrenches away from Wiconi, walking over to glare at Jane.

“So? You said you were a fighter all of those damn years ago. Fight for yourself, then!”

Jane stands up taller, staring down Kali. She’s slightly taller than her older sister, by a few inches. But both seem to match each other as they stare intensely.

“Killing people who are not trying to kill you is wrong,” Jane says sternly.

“Oh great, you’re one of *them* –“

“That man had a family! A family, and yes, he should have been punished for hurting us all, but –“

“You *are aware* that that pathetic excuse for a man would *attack me with electric prods*?” Kali snarls.

“You aren’t the law!”

“The law is bullshit!”

“YOU MADE ME LOOK AT THE MAN WHO RAPED ME –“

Kali’s eyes widen.

“Wh –“

“Papa raped me!” Jane screams, “Papa raped me and you made me

look at him! You wouldn't make him go away!"

Kali frowns heavily.

"I'm sorry."

Jane pants more, pacing the room.

"And even if he hadn't you shouldn't have done that! That's fucked up!"

"I wanted you to stay!"

"YOU SAID I WAS FREE TO GO!"

"WELL I CAN'T CONTROL HOW I FEEL –"

"Woah woah woah woah," Dustin says, stepping out of the crowd and walking over, "Okay, you two need to *chill out*, you need to *calm down* –"

"I will NOT calm down!" Kali screeches, "I'm sorry that I wanted to keep family around for *once* –"

Jane looks around, her eyes suddenly wide.

"Kali... where is everyone?"

"Gone," Kali grunts, walking away, "They left."

Jane follows her rapidly, walking around the empty warehouse with her.

"They *left*?"

"Yeah, they left! What do you want me to say? If you wanted to know you would have stayed."

"Kali –"

"You know, I kept hoping you would come back. That you'd save your policeman and your friends and then come back to me, back *home*. Even though it was a terrible idea, we stayed in Chicago for

months.”

Jane watches her, tears in her eyes.

“But when we figured you weren’t coming back, they had to *drag me* out of the city. Drag me, Jane. That’s how much I hoped you would return. So now you come back two years later, demanding an *apology* from me?”

“YOU MADE ME SEE PAPA,” Jane screams, looking furious, “Why are you *ignoring that*? We can disagree about whether or not what you do is wrong, that’s not why I left. I left because you *hurt me*. You hurt me! And you acted like it was *nothing!*”

Kali glares.

Jane glares back.

“I said I was sorry,” Kali mutters.

“I don’t think I forgive you,” Jane hisses, walking back out to the car.

Kali storms off, stomping off up a flight of stairs.

“Uh...” Will whispers.

“I’ll go... talk to Kali,” Dustin whispers, running up the stairs after the girl.

Wiconi frowns.

“Yeah, I shouldn’t. I’d just yell at her.”

“I’ll go talk to Jane. I don’t want her to get overwhelmed, so maybe I should –“

“Yeah, you go alone, kid,” Wiconi nods.

You run out to see Jane sitting on a bench, staring out in front of her.

“Jane?” you whisper.

“Mike...” she looks up at you, tears welling up in her eyes, “I’m... so

tired.”

You run to sit next to her, wrapping your arms around her and squeezing tightly.

“I’m tired too, Jane. I’m tired too.”

“She’s my sister. She’s my sister, and she doesn’t even feel sorry about what she did,” Jane mutters.

“I think she does feel sorry,” you murmur back, “I think she does feel sorry, but she... is hurt too. And she can’t move past that to realize that she’s the reason she got hurt, rather than you being the reason.”

“I can’t be strong enough,” Jane mumbles, “I can’t be strong enough to... be... to...”

You kiss her on the side of her head.

“You can’t be strong enough for what, Jane?”

“To... just ignore... all of this... and talk to her about why we’re here,” Jane mumbles, “I can’t move past what she did to me.”

“I don’t think you have to,” you kiss her again, “I think... I think you should lean on the rest of us for once.”

“What –“

“You’re so used to trying to... forge ahead on your own. You heard Tarek. You’re naturally leading this. But you’re also fifteen,” you wipe her hair out of her face, “And you just had... a really traumatic thing happen to you. And you’re still recovering from that.”

Jane nods, frowning.

“You should let the rest of us help you. Especially with Kali,” you murmur, kissing her on her forehead, “I promise. There will be time to talk to Kali about... everything... when we’re not on a mission, you know?”

Jane nods.

“I just... wish...”

“Yeah, me too,” you sigh, “Me too.”

She suddenly grabs you by the front of your sweater and kisses you heavily, you caught completely by surprise and unable to reciprocate for a few moments. You then wrap your arms around her tightly, holding her as close to you as you can as you continue to kiss her. She makes a soft sound and you kiss her more, the two of you so wrapped up in each other that you barely notice anything around you.

“Mike,” she whispers against your lips, her face all flushed and her eyes so intense and brown in front of you.

“Jane,” you whisper back.

She drags you away from the bench by the hand, leading you over to the car. You squeak in surprise, not entirely sure what’s going on –

“Mike? Jane?”

You both whirl around to see Will standing at the entrance, frowning.

“We’re going to stay here tonight. Kali needs time to... calm down. According to Dustin,” Will sighs, “It means a delay for us, I guess, but we weren’t going to make it back in time for school anyway.”

“Alright,” Jane sighs, walking back up to the warehouse.

You follow her wordlessly.

Your heart is still pounding a little bit too fast.

D E C E M B E R 26 1986

“Alright,” Wiconi sighs, “We’ve all taken time apart. Taken time to decompress. Talked to people.”

Kali is sitting next to Dustin, Dustin looking at her worriedly.

You glare at him.

Fucking traitor.

Jane is staring down at her shoes.

“Kali, tell me what you told me last night,” Dustin murmurs, looking at you and grimacing.

Kali glares at him for a second before sighing.

“I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have made you look at Papa, and talk to him. I was scared of losing you, and I was a dumb sixteen year old kid. I mean, I’m still a dumb kid. But. I was extra dumb. And I did what I thought people did to get others to stay with them. I tried to manipulate and intimidate you. And I shouldn’t have,” Kali takes a deep breath, “And I know you probably won’t forgive me, but that’s okay.”

Jane takes a deep breath too.

“I understand, Kali.”

“Not going to lie... I fucked up more after you left.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I was so frustrated with you leaving... and heartbroken... that I just. I took it out on the others. A lot. And when they got fed up with me, they left,” Kali sighs, “I’m just a fucking mess, honestly.”

“Me too,” Jane murmurs, “Just... a different sort of mess.”

“So,” Kali sits back, frowning more, “Why are you here?”

“I told you about the monster, and the gate I opened,” Jane sighs, “Well, I closed the gate.”

“Good for you.”

“But some of it was still around. In Dad, in Dustin –“

“Dad?” Kali asks.

“Dad?” Wiconi repeats.

“Uh... the policeman. He adopted me. And I... it’s taken a lot but I... part of me... getting over...” Jane takes a deep breath, “He’s more of a father to me than that other man will ever be.”

“Fair enough,” Wiconi says, shrugging.

“At any rate... it was still there. So it grew inside of them. Over two years. And then they started to cough it out. And it infected me,” Jane sighs, “Made me... think about... so many things.”

Kali frowns heavily.

“Mike rescued me,” Jane sighs, “But now I know. He’s coming back. He’s going to try to come back. And we all have to be ready.”

Kali gets up and starts to pace the room.

“So you’re gathering our family?”

“Yes.”

Kali sighs.

“I... have to think about it. I’m sorry, Jane. But... I still have my own work to do.”

“Your work?” Wiconi asks, glaring.

“Killing the men who hurt us.”

“You do realize that’s impossible,” Wiconi snorts.

“Not you too –“

“The Department of Energy’s fun secret branch is huge, extensive, and all over this crap-hole we get to call a country,” Wiconi pulls out another cigarette, “They’re everywhere.”

“I’ve been going through a list –“

“And apparently losing everyone you have to help you along the way?” Wiconi snorts.

“Thanks, sis –“

“Anytime, sis.”

“I’ve killed many of the researchers –“

“Yeah, and you living in a warehouse is *such* a good sign that it’s going *super* well –“

“Can we please *stop fighting*,” Lucas groans, “That is *not the point*.”

“Yeah, Jane just wants to know if you’ll come back and help us,” Will agrees.

Kali sighs.

“I have to think about it. Like I said.”

Jane nods, staring down at her lap.

“Let’s rest,” Dustin says, jumping up, “Look, Christmas was yesterday – Chanukah starts tonight – we all need *rest*. We all need time to ourselves. We’ve been on the road for *ages*.”

“I don’t celebrate Christmas. Or Chanukah,” Kali mutters.

“I mainly mean for me, Lucas, and Max. Mike and Will celebrate Chanukah and Jane hasn’t decided what she believes yet,” Dustin says, shrugging, “We just... need a moment to ourselves.”

“I want to call my mom,” Will agrees.

“Yeah,” Lucas sighs, “Me too.”

“Me too,” Max murmurs.

“There’s a payphone down the street,” Kali directs, shrugging, “I’m going to go shopping. I need food.”

Jane gets up, an awkward expression on her face.

“Can I come with you?”

Kali nods.

"I'll come too," Wiconi offers, the three of them walking away.

You follow the others to the pay phone, cornering Dustin as Will gets on the phone and leans against the booth, grimacing again as the sounds of screaming can be heard on the line.

"Great way to side with the enemy," you mutter quietly.

"The *enemy*?"

"You heard me!" you shout, "She hurt Jane and you took her side!"

"Okay, first of all, I didn't take her side," Dustin snaps, looking furious, "I tried to get her to see that what she was doing was wrong, but you know, *empathetically*, you asshole."

You scowl.

"Second of all, she's her *family*. She doesn't have to stick with them, she can do what she wants, but the whole *point* of this goddamn *hell* of an expedition is for Jane to gather her weird psychic family and get everyone together. So way to lose the damn *point*, asshole!"

You scowl more.

"Mike, you gotta apologize," Lucas sighs, "Dustin's right."

You glare a little, but slump your shoulders.

"Fine, I'm sorry."

"Damn right," Dustin mutters, and you both shake hands, you trying to not bristle more.

No one hurts Jane.

"Besides that, Kali is... hurting too. Not like Jane is, but she *is*. She's been on her own for a while. I feel... bad for her, alright?" Dustin sighs, pacing around the pavement.

"So you *want* her to join us?" you groan.

"No? No I don't. I don't want to hurt Jane. But I want her to... talk to someone. A real person," Dustin clarifies.

"Yeah," you admit, "Me too."

"I want to sleep in a bed," Max sighs, "A real bed. My bed. Not a motel bed. Or a car. Or the floor."

"Agreed," Lucas nods.

You eventually get to the phone, dialing up and grimacing as you know your mom is about to pick up.

"Mikha'el Ephraim Levinson –"

"Chag Chanukah Sameach, mom," you mumble.

"Don't chag sameach me, young man, you run off in the middle of the night –"

"Yeah..."

"Leaving only a note, 'off to find Jane's family' –"

"Yup..."

"Taking my *credit card* with you –"

"That was wrong of me and I'm sorry –"

"And you barely call! It's been *days!*"

"We've been on the road most of that time," you explain, "We want to get home as soon as possible –"

"It's the holidays, Mikha'el! The holidays! We aren't celebrating Christmas anymore, there's no reason to –"

"Mom, this isn't about rebellion at all, okay? It isn't about my trauma or Dad or anything. Jane just... needs this... and they weren't going to bring her along!"

"A cross country trip isn't *safe* for you kids!"

“Probably not, but nothing really is,” you point out.

Your mom sighs over the phone.

“Mike, I know you mean well, but this is really not okay. When you get home, you’re grounded.”

“Yeah that’s... that’s fair,” you agree.

“*Please* be safe. There was a blizzard up in Minnesota and we were all worried *sick* –“

“Yeah that... was not a great moment,” you sigh, “But from now on we’re driving mainly in the south?”

“Until you reach *New York City* –“

“Yeah that’s... going to be fun.”

Your mom sighs audibly over the phone.

“Look. You have some relatives up in New York. *Please* stay with them.”

“You realize finding very specific Levinsons in New York City is like _“

“Well, you can do what you want, but be safe. And *check in more often!*”

“Yes, mom...”

“And, Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Stay safe.”

“I will Mom.”

“Chag Chanukah Sameach.”

“Chag Chanukah Sameach,” you greet, and you hang up the phone,

guilt coursing through you.

You kind of wish this trip was done, but it is no where near finished.

After a while, you set up your electronic menorah in the window, staring at it and sighing as you mentally prepare yourself for the blessings.

“Mike?”

You turn around to see Will, who’s smiling at you.

“Can I join you?”

“Yeah,” you grin. You both stand there with the Menorah, singing softly underneath your breath as you ready yourself to press the button for the first candle.

“Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha’olam, asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav, v’tzivanu l’had’lik near shel Chanukah. Baruch atah adoni, eloheinu melech ha’olam, she’asah nisim la’avoteinu, bayamim haheim baz’man hazeh. Baruch atah adoni eloheinu melech ha’olam shecheyanu v’kiy’manu v’higyanu lazman hazeh.”

You and Will smile at each other, you pressing the button and starting to sing.

“Hanerot halalu anachnu madlikin, al hanissim ve’al haniflaot, al hatshu-ot ve’al hamilchamot. She-asita la’avoteynu, Bayamin hahem, bazman hazeh, al yedey konanecha hakdoshim. Vechol shmonat yemey Chanukah, Hanerot halalu kodesh hem, ve-ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh, bahem Ela lirotam bilvad. Kedai lehodot leshimcha, al nissecha veal nifleotecha, ve-al yeshuotecha.”

You both grin at each other and start singing Maoz Tsur together, watching the flickering electric light as people move and talk quietly behind you.

It’s a moment of clarity in an otherwise shitty situation.

You both rejoin the rest of the group, Kali and Wiconi talking quietly as Jane walks up to you and kisses you softly, wrapping her arms

around you tightly and holding you close to her.

“Jane? What’s up?” you ask softly.

“I’m just... I don’t know. I’m sorry I didn’t join you up there?” she murmurs.

“You’re figuring stuff out. You told me that months ago,” you reassure, “You have all the time you need, okay?”

Jane nods, kissing you again and sitting down as you all do together, looking at each other in awkward silence.

“I... don’t think I’ll be coming back with you all,” Kali murmurs after a while.

“Really?” Dustin asks, frowning.

“Yeah,” Kali nods, “Look, if everything goes to shit... like you say it will... then I’ll get out to Hawkins ASAP. Heck, I’ll narrow my search to places in the Midwest. But... for now... I think we both need our space still. I need to figure some shit out, and you do too. We have a lot of baggage right now, and we both need to sort it out before we spend a lot of time together.”

Jane nods silently.

“I’m sorry, Kali.”

“I’m sorry too, Jane. I’m arguably sorrier,” Kali frowns, “But... now isn’t the time for either of us to try to be sisters again.”

Jane nods again, sighing.

“Can we stay here one more night? Before heading out?”

“I don’t see why not,” Kali agrees, “You have a long journey to go.”

One out of six.

Not the greatest success record.

DECEMBER 29 1986

Getting from San Francisco to Austin, Texas was a complete nightmare.

All the legs of your journey had been long so far, but this was *extra* long – plenty of pit stops, plenty of breaks, two different motel stops.

And it was *hot*.

Well, not hot. But *hotter*. Too warm for what you packed.

“Guys, before we leave Roswell, can we *please* check out the UFO crash site?” Dustin begs, looking at you all with puppy-dog shaped eyes.

“Are you kidding me right now, Dustin?” Lucas groans.

“I’m serious! We’re all the way in *New Mexico*! When will we *ever* have this opportunity again?” Dustin pleads.

“Literally... any other point in our lives,” you snort.

“We did take the detour so Dustin can check it out,” Jane reminds you all.

“Yeah! That’s why we came up here! *Please?*”

“Ugh, *fine*,” Lucas groans, “But this is ridiculous and I’m doing it under protest.”

“You have to admit you’re at least a *little* curious about it! Aliens! UFOs!”

Lucas grins a bit, “Yeah, yeah. I’m curious.”

“Nerds,” Max rolls her eyes.

“Max, you *know* you’re curious –“

“We have been on the road for *more than a week* and I am *dying*. I’d be curious at literally *any other point* of my life –“

“Yeah, well, we’re going, come on guys,” Wiconi says, rolling her eyes.

You take off to the crash site, Dustin and Lucas nerding out together, their enthusiasm so infectious that you're all nerding out by the end of the day, except for Wiconi, who is just tired in a corner.

"I wonder if there's aliens sometimes," Jane murmurs.

"Well there are alternate dimensions, so why not aliens?" Will asks.

"I mean like... aliens that are close. Ones that will talk to us. And not kill us," Jane sighs.

"You want there to be something mystical out there?" Max asks seriously.

"Or just, anything, you know? That isn't a Mind Flayer."

"Alright knuckleheads," Wiconi rolls her eyes, "That's *enough* time wasted. We've gotta get to Austin. It's time to break out a kid."

"Fuck yeah," Max cheers.

"We should have a general idea of the layout of the lab," Lucas says, "Before we get anywhere *near* it."

"I can try," Jane murmurs, "We're far away..."

"Well, you have seen Russian men from across the world," Max points out.

"Without figuring out anything *around him!* And a sensory deprivation tank! I have none of that here," Jane glares.

"Right, I agree we should drive closer for Jane to figure out something similar to a layout. Mike, how confident are you in your ability to predict what will happen?" Wiconi asks.

"Uh, not very. I basically can just predict immediately coming events with any amount of accuracy. After that it's variable and subject to the whims of human will," you say, frowning.

"Fantastic. Do you kids have any weapons besides a baseball bat with nails in it?" Wiconi groans.

“Uh... we have a grappling hook?” Dustin offers.

“Bunch of rock climbing equipment –“

“Flashlights!”

“Our internal senses of *conviction!*”

“Telekinetic Teenage Girl?”

“A slingshot.”

“My BB gun...”

“A power drill?”

“A really sharp knife...”

“Some gasoline reserves and a lighter –“

“Tears?”

Wiconi groans, holding her head in her hands.

“How were you planning on doing this in the *first place?*”

“Very quietly?” you offer, grimacing.

“Alright,” Wiconi digs into her bag, pulling out objects. She hands you a gun, looking straight into your eyes.

“Do you know how to use this?”

“Not really, no,” you answer seriously.

“Alright,” Wiconi nods again, “I guess we’re having gun shooting lessons. In Roswell. Land of the aliens.”

She closes her eyes in psychological pain and groans, but lines all the rest of you up, putting empty beer cans on top of fence posts. Will looks at you nervously, and you grimace back.

But a part of you is thrilled.

It's not even the self-loathing part of you, either.

You just are excited to be able to defend yourself, *finally*.

"Do I have to do this?" Jane asks, frowning.

"Yes," Wiconi says, "You can't be that reliant on your powers. You have to have multiple lines of defense. Now come on, let's do this."

She hands you a gun and points you at the target, explaining how all of the parts work and how to aim. You shake a little bit while holding it, but you hold it up, steady your hands, and shoot.

The kickback throws you to the ground.

"Shit," you groan, getting up and rubbing your head.

Wiconi kneels next to you and holds out her hands over your head, her eyes closed in focus. You feel something warm go over you – like warm water rushing over your body. When she opens her eyes, your head no longer hurts.

A trickle of blood goes down her nostril.

"Thanks," you say, getting up with a grunt.

"Sometimes I'm useful. Alright, let's try that again."

It takes you quite a few tries to get it, but eventually you manage to hit the target multiple times.

Lucas learns how to use it right away, and Will too; but Dustin and Max both take some extra time.

Jane shoots the target immediately, the fastest of all of you.

"Okay, no kinetic powers, sister," Wiconi snorts.

"Oh come on –"

"No! This is so you don't *rely on your powers*! Come on, Jane," Wiconi begs.

You're sitting down on the ground, eating some of your food with Lucas, watching nervously.

You just don't want her to get hurt.

You don't know if you could live with yourself if she got hurt on this trip.

She tries again.

She handles the kickback well enough, but shoots wildly off target, the bullet heading off into the sky.

"Okay, Jane, you have to *aim* –"

You spend almost the entire day there, watching as Jane tries to learn to shoot.

Turns out having psychokinetic abilities means you don't actually learn how to maneuver things well on your own.

Eventually, though, she hits the target, and you all pack up and drive into Austin, checking into a motel on the opposite side of the city from the lab.

You really hope you can rescue the kid.

DECEMBER 30 1986

"We all know the plan?" Wiconi hisses as you approach the large, imposing building, almost smack-dab in the middle of the city.

"We're in the cars, ready to drive away," Max agrees, pointing to her and Dustin.

"I'm on high future telling alert," you say.

"I'm on point," Jane nods, "Directing us straight to Maria."

"Lucas and I are on defense with guns, and Will's got the tools for getting in and out of the room," Wiconi nods, "We know the right window to sneak in through, we know the way through the building,

and Mike's going to keep checking for guard shifts. But we *have to be fast*. The longer we spend in here..."

"The more likely one of us dies or gets imprisoned," Jane whispers.

"Exactly. Alright. Let's do this."

You all start to head up to the building, Wiconi throwing up a grappling hook to the window. Will starts forward with Wiconi close behind, quickly unscrewing the window and diving in. The rest of you follow up fast as the cars wait at the bottom of the hill, your heart pounding in your ears as you sprint down the hallway.

"Watch for them, Mike!" Jane hisses. You nod and close your eyes, letting Jane guide you by the hand with the rest of them.

"Guard, left side, fifteen seconds away," you whisper.

You're dragged somewhere else and you open your eyes in a supply closet.

"Keep watching!" Wiconi mouths.

You close your eyes again.

"Gone in half a minute."

You all wait for a while.

Eventually you hear the door open, and you walk through more.

"Four guards are going to be heading up the stairs for their lunch –"

"Quick, this room –"

You're dragged somewhere else again.

You wish you could stop going back and forth between the immediate future and now .

It hurts your head.

"Where are we in the building, Jane?" Lucas asks.

You look over at Jane who closes her eyes, her hands balled into fists.

“She’s two levels away, directly above us.”

“So we have to get to some stairs?”

“Essentially.”

“Or,” Will looks around, frowning up at the ceiling, “We get in through the hard way.”

“Fucking brilliant. I would kiss you if it weren’t wildly inappropriate,” Wiconi cheers, “Start drilling.”

Will drills into the ceiling tile, loosening it. Jane raises him up into the ceiling as the rest of you follow, before Lucas helps pull Jane up into the space.

Will crouches underneath and drills up again, and you all crawl up to the next room. It’s pitch dark, window curtains drawn.

“Okay, repeat that process, *quickly*,” you hiss, keeping your eyes closed and focusing.

“I’m going!” Will hisses back, digging up into the ceiling.

You all scramble back up, going again into the next room up.

You land in a small room. There’s a bed in the corner, and some drawings on the walls.

A girl screams.

She’s small and skinny and has a shaved head, and her skin is darker than Jane’s, but otherwise she’s similarly soft and small looking. It reminds you too much of her.

Right down to the tattoo on her wrist.

Too much.

Much too much.

Your heart breaks almost instantly.

“Maria, Maria, it’s us,” Jane whispers, running up to her, “Your sisters.”

“Sis...ters?” Maria asks, frowning, “Wh –“

Jane and Wiconi hold up their arms to her, and Maria holds up hers in return.

014

She looks at them in fear, with wide eyes, shaking a little on herself.

“B-“

“We’re breaking you out, okay? We’re rescuing you. We promise,” Wiconi whispers.

Maria looks behind her at the door.

Shouting starts to ring out through the halls.

She nods rapidly and Wiconi picks her up, everyone running over to the window.

“Will do you have the grappling hook –“

“Yeah I’m readying it –“

“You’re going to have to hit the tree *perfectly* –“

“Yes, Lucas, I know!”

“OPEN UP IN THERE –“

The door bangs open.

Jane whirls around on her heels and strangles the guard.

Wiconi pulls out her gun and shoots another in the head.

Maria cries loudly.

Lucas pulls out his gun and shoots another guard in the shin.

“GO GO GO GO GO!” you scream, and Will sets the wire, all of you sliding down it one by one. Jane levitates Maria gently to the ground as you sprint to the cars, gunshots ringing out behind you as you run as fast as you can over the grass.

“GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO –“ Dustin screams from Wiconi’s car. Everyone dives in as Jane cries out in pain, and you look around frantically to see she’s clutching a bleeding ankle.

“JANE!” you scream.

Wiconi grabs her and hoists her into the car, before Dustin drives off rapidly, Maria and Will and Lucas in the other car.

“Jane, Jane, Jane, Jane –“ you sob, reaching for her. Wiconi grabs her leg and closes her eyes, and eventually Jane’s bleeding stops, Jane breathing with relief as the wound closes up.

“Got it,” Wiconi breathes, sitting back in her chair and sighing with relief.

“Breaking into the other lab is going to be... hard,” Dustin whispers after a long time spent driving away from the sound of police sirens, “Now that they know we’re doing this.”

“We’ll just have to have a different plan, then,” you mutter, holding Jane tightly to yourself.

You wish this trip was over already.

D E C E M B E R 3 1 1 9 8 6

You kind of just want to leave Texas.

Because now you just associate it with heat, a complete lack of Chanukah *anywhere*, and Jane bleeding.

“It’s okay, Mike,” Jane whispers for the millionth time, as you’re all walking up to the next psychic’s house together, Maria shy and still silent behind you all.

“No, it’s not,” you mutter, your heart in your throat, but now was not the time to argue about it all.

You reach the front door, and Jane knocks, looking exhausted.

A very grumpy, blonde and pale man with glasses looks out at you all.

“Well? What do you all want?” he asks, glaring.

“We’re your family, dipshit,” Wiconi says, raising an eyebrow.

She and Jane hold up their wrists.

The man’s eyes widen.

He holds up his in a flash –

006

Before putting it back down.

“Get inside you idiots!” he hisses, dragging all of you into his house and slamming the door behind you.

“I’ve worked *ridiculously hard* to carve out my space in this fucking *pit* we call a state and I haven’t had a single God-damned government goon find me in *two years*. What the *fuck* are you doing here and how can I make you leave as quickly as humanely possible?” Eric hisses.

Everyone looks at each other in shock.

“We need your help,” Jane mutters after a while.

“Right, well, sorry Eleven, but –“

“Jane,” Jane mutters.

Eric looks at her angrily.

“Fine. Jane. Sorry kiddo, but this help train has left the damn station –“

“Eric, you shut the fuck up,” Wiconi hisses.

“YOU CAME TO *MY HOUSE* –“

“Calm the fuck down, Eric!” Wiconi snaps, “There’s more at stake here than our lives!”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me –“

“It’s the end of the world,” you snap, *done* with this guy’s attitude, “It’s the end of the world, and we’re gathering the whole psychic family.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that working out for you? Seems to me only three of you are here,” Eric says, looking around at Maria, who is still cowering in fear behind Will.

“Poorly,” Wiconi grunts.

“Then I feel no guilt at dropping out –“

“Fuck you too, Eric,” Jane mutters.

“*Excuse me?*”

“I said *fuck you too*. You know what?” Jane stands up taller, looking at Eric straight in the eye, her hands balled up into fists, “Fuck you too. You didn’t even give me a *chance* to explain what’s happening. I hope you fucking *die* when everything comes.”

“Real nice, *sis*, real nice –“

“A giant shadow monster wants to destroy the entire planet and everyone on it,” Wiconi says coldly, “We don’t know when he’ll break through or how much damage he’ll do immediately, but be on alert, kay? Might need your damn shield once in a while.”

“Noted,” Eric says, glaring back at her.

“Come on, Jane. We’re leaving,” Wiconi mutters.

Jane looks at Eric for another minute, before tilting her head rapidly

to the side. A bunch of his books fall off the shelf.

“HEY! ASSHOLE!” Eric shouts, but Jane is already leaving in a huff.

“Jane –“ you call after her, but she doesn’t respond, just getting into the car with Maria. You sigh and get in after her, running your hands over your face.

“Could just... *one other person*,” Lucas grunts from the front seat, “Just *one other person* join us? For fucking crying out loud –“

“Who’s next,” Dustin asks tiredly, taking off on the road. Max and Will are with Wiconi in the other car.

“Eduardo. And he’s all the way in Miami, Florida, so we have a long journey ahead of us,” Lucas sighs.

“We should take a pit stop. Let Wiconi know. I don’t feel like sleeping in the car again.”

“Makes sense.”

“What are you saying –“

“I’m saying that in the car you can’t fart without the rest of us –“

“Hey!”

“We’ve all been cooped up together too long,” you groan quietly, “We need space.”

“Yeah,” Lucas agrees tiredly.

Eventually you all reach a crappy motel in Mississippi, everyone on edge – you were not the whitest of groups, and Dustin did most of the talking while you, Will, Lucas, Wiconi, and Maria hid in the car.

He, Jane, and Max walk back over after a while, waving some keys in their hands.

“Didn’t question anything. Thank God. Didn’t feel like having them turn away two Jewish people, a black guy, a Native American chick,

and a little Mexican girl,” Dustin groans.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all grateful,” Lucas mutters, “Let’s just go to bed.”

“They didn’t have a lot of rooms available, so congrats, Jane and Mike, you get your own room. It’s tiny and you’ll be very very close. Hope that isn’t a problem,” Dustin says, tossing you a key.

“No,” you sigh, “It’s not.”

You climb into the room and Jane immediately flops on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Do you want to just go home?” you ask quietly, looking at her sadly.

She looks up at you and glares.

“No, I don’t.”

“Alright.”

“Just cause I’m an utter failure doesn’t mean I shouldn’t keep trying.”

“You’re not an utter failure, Jane –“

“I’m a failure. We’ve seen eight out of thirteen of my siblings and only two are with us now. What are the odds that all of the last five will come with us? It’s impossible,” Jane grunts, “We’ll be lucky to get one more.”

“Well, that’s not the only purpose of our trip,” you reassure quietly, “You also just wanted to see them again, and let them know danger was coming.”

“Yeah,” Jane sighs, looking at the ceiling again, “Yeah.”

You sit down on the floor.

Trying to not spiral.

You didn’t protect her –

Shut up –

You didn't protect her –

Shut up –

You couldn't protect her –

Shut up –

You couldn't do it –

Shut up –

You had to have her sister do it –

SHUT UP –

You're useless –

SHUT UP –

Worthless –

SHUT UP –

A complete failure –

SHUT UP –

“Mike?”

You look up at Jane rapidly.

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“Not really,” you admit softly.

She crawls over to you, looking at you worriedly. She puts her hand on your face and you start crying.

“Mike?”

You sob even more, crashing your head into her shoulder before you can stop yourself, just crying heavily and wishing that your mind would stop.

Just stop

Just stop

Just stop

Just stop

“Mike, it’s not your fault.”

“You don’t even –“

“The heist went well, all things considered,” Jane murmurs, “We got Maria out. None of us died. We didn’t burn down the building.”

You laugh weakly.

“That’s true.”

“And Wiconi healed me right up.”

You sigh.

“I should have –“

“No,” Jane says firmly.

You look at her with wide eyes.

“You did everything you could. It’s okay, Mike. It’s okay.”

You lean in and kiss her, and she kisses you back softly, making your heart do little flips in your chest again.

“Is the door locked?” she asks quietly.

“Uh... yeah?” you answer back, looking at her in confusion.

She then leans in and kisses you again, and you can safely say she

distracts you from the mind spiral long enough to escape it.

JANUARY 1 1987

“Did you guys have a nice new year’s eve?” Dustin asks casually as you start driving to Miami, looking at you both with a smirk.

You and Jane look at each other with wide eyes, both instantly blushing furiously.

“Uh – yes. Yes we did,” you say, trying to not squeak.

“Yup,” Jane agrees.

“Perfectly lovely.”

“We tried to get you guys to come over to our room for some impromptu Dungeons and Dragons –“ Lucas begins, frowning.

“We were... decompressing,” Jane answers, biting her lip.

It looks adorable.

“Yup. Decompressing. That’s what we were doing,” you agree, grinning a little bit despite yourself. You can’t help it, really.

“Uh-huh. Well. You kids can call it whatever you want,” Dustin jokes.

“I hate you so much right now,” Lucas groans.

“Love you too, buddy. Love you too.”

“Let’s just... let’s just get to Miami, okay.”

“Sure. Miami. Let’s go,” Dustin chortles.

“Dustin, *leave them alone* –“

“Yeah, yeah, yeah –“

Jane hides behind her hair, burying her face in it. You want to brush it out of the way, but you just stare out of the window instead.

You reach Miami by the late nighttime, immediately heading to Eduardo's house.

As you park the cars outside of it in the humid environment, Dustin takes you aside.

"In all seriousness – what happened?" Dustin asks quietly.

"Dude, I'm *not telling you* –"

"Just, you know, Jane's still –"

"I *know Jane's still*. We didn't... you know..."

"Oh, okay –"

"We're like, fifteen, man –"

"Fair point –"

"You don't need to know any more than that –"

"Fair enough," Dustin agrees, "Just, you know. If you hurt her I'll kill you."

"Thanks for that sentiment, man," you roll your eyes, "Come on. Let's go meet an eleven year old psychic boy."

"My favorite activity!"

You roll your eyes and awkwardly walk up with everyone to the door, Wiconi ringing the bell. For once, she's not wearing leather.

The door opens and an older man looks at you all, frowning.

"Hola...?"

"Hola, Señor Gonzalez. Me llamo Wiconi, y soy una hermana de Eduardo," Wiconi greets, "Por favor, podemos hablar en inglés?"

The man frowns.

"Yes. Yes we can."

He leads you all inside, walking through to a small living room. A lot of children are running around, and one in particular looks up at you all with a frown.

“El... Eleven?” he asks softly, walking up to Jane.

“Hey, Eduardo,” Jane murmurs, “I go by Jane now.”

Eduardo is a small, dark skinned boy, with black curly hair. His face, which had been frowning before, breaks out into a wide grin. You can see his number on his wrist.

015

“Jane! Hermana!”

He runs up and wraps his arms tightly around her. He then looks and sees Wiconi and frowns.

“Are you –“

“I’m seven,” she greets, “Well, Wiconi now.”

He beams at her and hugs her, too.

“No recuerdote muy bien pero –“

“English, bro, English,” Wiconi laughs.

Eduardo nods and his face furrows in concentration.

“I don’t remember you very well, but I remember Jane –“

Maria walks out from behind Wiconi, smiling a little.

“Fourteen!” Eduardo gasps, “Fourteen?”

She nods, smiling. Eduardo tackles her in a hug, and both get up, giggling.

Eduardo’s father looks at you all, frowning.

“What are you doing here? Surely you know the risks,” he murmurs

after a while.

“We do,” Jane sighs, “And we wouldn’t have come here if there wasn’t a bigger risk.”

“I’m listening,” he says, nodding.

“Well, Señor Gonzalez –“

“Please, call me Diego.”

“Diego... how did you get your son out?” Wiconi asks softly.

“He got himself out,” Diego snaps as more children run around them all. He then sighs again.

“Evelina had difficulty conceiving. We blamed those drug trials she went into, when we needed money,” Diego sighs, “Our first son was Eduardo. He was taken away immediately after he was born. Oh, of course we *never* trusted it. We had a few more children –“

“A few?” Lucas hisses under his breath, and Max elbows him in the side.

“Well, more than a few,” Eduardo laughs, “But, soon... Evelina... well... I blame the drugs, really.”

Jane looks like she might cry.

You kind of want to, too.

“Eduardo found me not long after. Managed to escape, little genius. Fire generating genius, but genius,” Diego pauses, “We moved around a lot after that. But, for the past year, we’ve been safe. The last name change stuck. Just another immigrant.”

“We’re sorry for potentially putting you in danger,” Jane murmurs, “But... something is coming.”

“What?” Diego asks, frowning more.

Maria and Eduardo are playing in the corner, oblivious to the

conversation.

“A monster. And it wants to destroy the world,” Jane takes a deep breath, “We’re... warning everyone. Potentially gathering the troops...”

“You cannot gather my son,” Diego says firmly, glaring at you all, “And that’s final.”

“We understand,” Wiconi murmurs, “But... be careful. And be ready.”

Diego sighs.

“We will. I wouldn’t believe you, if...”

He looks over at Eduardo.

“If this wasn’t really that much of a surprise, considering... it all.”

“Yeah,” Wiconi agrees, “Yeah.”

Jane watches Eduardo wistfully.

You wish you could give her back her childhood.

You hate that you can’t change the past.

J A N U A R Y 3 1 9 8 7

“Alright, I’ve been talking to Fumiko off and on for a while, so let me do the explanation,” Wiconi sighs.

“Yeah, alright,” Jane nods, looking exhausted.

You all do.

Wiconi rings the doorbell to the small city apartment. Snow starts to fall around you all, and in D.C., this was a stark change from the heat of the south.

“Hello?”

“Fumiko, it’s Wiconi. I know this is a surprise visit and you hate that,

but –“

“Yes, I do.”

“It’s kind of an emergency. Well, a surprise more than an emergency. But not one that’s my fault? So there’s that –“

“Argh. Fine. Come up.”

“Okay, if Fumiko hates surprises,” Lucas hisses, “*Why didn’t we warn her we were coming?*”

“Because she also would have insisted we not come,” Wiconi mutters, “I was picking the lesser of two evils. Come on, we have to get up there.”

You reach one of the higher floors, walking into a sleek, neat apartment – apart from the piles of paper on every single surface.

“Hello Wi – uh –“ Fumiko begins to greet, rounding a corner as Wiconi puts away the key in her pocket.

“Sorry, I brought some street rats with me,” Wiconi jokes.

“Okay, I’m going to need ten different types of explanation here –“

She’s a curvy woman, with short black hair, the ends of it dyed blue. Her skin is pale, her eyes are brown, and she’s dressed in entirely black clothing.

In short, she’s a little intimidating.

“I’m Jane,” Jane walks forward, smiling, “Eleven.”

“*Eleven?*” Fumiko breathes, “Holy shit –“

She runs up to Eleven and hugs her tightly, lifting her up from the ground.

“I can’t believe you’re here! Holy crap!” Fumiko cries, “Where – how –“

“I broke out,” Jane whispers, “Also, I’m Jane now.”

“Right, my bad,” Fumiko holds up her arm, “Hard to shake this, huh?”

003

“Yeah,” Jane nods, smiling a little, “Hard.”

“Still, it’s amazing to see you – I’m so happy – how did you get out? Why are you here now? What’s going on –“

“I can find people with my mind,” Jane whispers, “So I’m finding all of us.”

“All... of us?”

“All of us?”

“Please tell me you haven’t found Eight – Kali – whatever,” Fumiko groans.

“I actually met her a long time ago,” Jane murmurs.

Fumiko sighs.

“She’s a bad influence, I swear –“

“She’s dealing with what happened to us in her own way. You can’t tell me you think those men deserve to live,” Wiconi mutters.

“No, but it’s not her job to take care of it –“

“Easy for you to say when you live in a nice apartment and work for the government that tortured and raped us,” Wiconi growls.

“Do we have to have this argument *again* –“

“Yes! We do! You’re lucky I don’t think of you as a *traitor*, Fumiko!”

“I’m doing what I can from the inside,” Fumiko glares, folding her arms over her chest, “Making them forget us, or remember us, as needed. I’m doing what I can. And I’m cooperating. Which makes them a *lot* more predisposed to leaving us alone, unlike you and Kali, the great cop murderers –“

Wiconi takes a deep breath.

“There’s no point to having this argument for the twelfth time,” Wiconi looks around the room with a look of confusion, “What... is all this?”

“My quest to find Papa continues fruitlessly.”

Wiconi frowns.

“Wait a second,” Fumiko turns on her heels to face Jane, “You found all of us? With your powers?”

“Uh –“

“You could find him! And then I could finally get that bastard *behind bars* –“

“No,” Jane murmurs softly.

“Whaddya mean, *no* –“

“Fumiko, no,” Wiconi whispers softly.

She looks back and forth between all of your faces, which, with the exception of Maria’s, are in varying stages of horror and seriousness.

“What... happened?” Fumiko hisses quietly.

“Look, I’ll talk to you in private. Don’t want...” Wiconi looks over at Maria, “It’s not a good conversation here.”

Fumiko looks over at Maria.

“Fourteen?” she whispers.

Maria nods, looking terrified.

“Yeah,” Fumiko agrees, “Let’s talk alone. You can give me the entire story –“

“I’m coming too,” Jane mutters.

“Me too,” you agree.

Fumiko looks at you in confusion.

“No offense, kid – “

“He’s one of us, now,” Wiconi mutters, “He’s a part of this too.”

Fumiko frowns more.

“One of...”

“Long story,” Jane whispers, “Please. Let us tell you.”

“Yeah... yeah, alright.”

You all retreat to Fumiko’s bedroom, sitting down on various pieces of furniture. Fumiko watches Jane seriously, as she starts to go through the whole story, from beginning to end.

Every word makes your heart break a little more.

“Wow... that’s... that’s a lot to take in, Jane,” Fumiko whispers.

“It’s a lot to live through,” Jane says.

“Well... sorry for bringing up –“

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I... can’t come with you all though,” Fumiko says, looking around at you all and grimacing, “I really can’t.”

“Fucking –“

“Look, I need to stay on the inside, alright?” Fumiko pauses, “Now more than ever. If something is coming...”

“You’re right,” you say quietly.

“Thanks, Mike.”

Wiconi glares at you.

“But –“ Jane says.

“Look, she’s right. We need someone at the top, watching out for all of us. Especially when we break Rico out. We’re too much of a risk as it is,” you pause, “I agree with Fumiko.”

Jane sighs.

“Yeah. Alright.”

“As it is, you all should probably leave soon,” Fumiko grimaces, “They really don’t need much of an excuse to lock me up again.”

Wiconi frowns.

“Do you want to –“

“For the millionth time, *no*. I’m happy where I am, sis,” Fumiko pauses, “And I... I think I can help better from here, than from Hawkins.”

“Alright,” Wiconi sighs, “Sorry we came here.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Fumiko hugs Jane tightly, “I’m glad I got to see you all again. I remember...”

Her eyes get a far away look.

“I just... I remember. Telling stories to each other. Without many words, but with our blocks and our pictures. I remember braiding each other’s hair... back when we were still permitted to have it. I... I... I hope one day we *can* all be reunited,” Fumiko pauses, “I miss everyone.”

Jane smiles, as does Wiconi.

You just feel awkward.

Out of place.

You know you’ll never really be one of them.

Even if you wish you were.

JANUARY 4 1987

You arrived in New York City the night before.

If you had thought Chicago was huge, NYC made you remember how insignificant you truly are.

But you had a heist to conduct.

“Alright, Rico’s in a small lab on Long Island. Less terrain to navigate, but probably more guards on alert since the lab does very little but hold Rico,” Jane says, gathering everyone around her.

“We are so close to going home I can taste it,” Max breathes, a dreamy look on her face, “Just three more people...”

“Right, which is why we can’t fuck this up,” Wiconi interjects, “Same plan as the last.”

“Shouldn’t we be worried about our getaway cars getting recognized?” Lucas asks seriously.

“I’m not sure. If we really had to worry about that, in theory... in theory we would have already been attacked,” Wiconi pauses, “Alright... Maria, you’re staying in the car with Max, alright?”

Maria nods, looking at all of you curiously, as usually, but not really understanding what’s happening.

“I’d like to get away with not shooting anyone today, if that’s alright with you,” Lucas grunts.

“Hopefully you will,” Wiconi pauses, “Jane, are you *sure* it is a less complicated layout?”

“Positive.”

“Alright then,” Wiconi gets up, “Let’s go rescue a kid.”

Everyone looks at each other in determination and drives out to Long Island, the atmosphere so tense you could cut it with a knife.

You reach the building and Will and Lucas help you all hoist into the window of Rico's room, everyone climbing in and stumbling to the floor.

"What?" Jane whispers, whirling around.

He isn't there.

"Jane..." Wiconi says, frowning, "Did you –"

"This is his room! He was just here!"

You close your eyes.

Past.

Five minutes earlier, yes, he was there.

And then they moved him.

"They're taking him away!" you shout.

Everyone looks at you in shock.

"They're *taking him away!*" you repeat, and you sprint out the room, Jane close on your heels.

You sprint down the hallways, running as fast as you can.

"That's them! That's them!"

You whirl around on your heels to see two guards running up to you, guns out.

Your heart leaps in your throat –

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Jane screams, holding her hand up. Both of them are thrown backwards into the wall behind you. She turns, grabs your arm, and you all keep running – Will, Wiconi, and Lucas following close behind.

"What's happening? Guys? You should have been out here –" the radio crackles.

“Dustin, with all due respect, *shut the fuck up and move the cars!*” Lucas screeches.

Jane runs as fast as she can as you close your eyes and keep imagining the future.

“Two guards –“

Wiconi dives out in front of you and shoots without discussion, and you keep running, stepping over the bodies while Lucas mutters “*fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*” over and over under his breath.

Jane closes her eyes and you keep yours open, guiding her now, blood trickling down across your lips.

“He’s outside!”

Lucas sprints ahead of you all, running rapidly to the front entrance. Wiconi covers him, shooting at guards as they sprint out to the front.

“No you fucking *don’t* –“ Lucas shouts, diving and grabbing one of the guards leading along a small, skinny boy, about your age, with medium brown skin and a shaved head, though its clear his hair is black poking through his scalp.

He looks around at all of you in complete confusion.

Will rushes forward and kicks one of the other guards in the groin, making him double over. Jane chokes another as Will leads Rico away, Wiconi holding up her gun as more guards follow you all.

“We have to go – run, Will, *run* –“ you shout.

Everyone sprints, running to the cars, which are zooming towards you – presumably having been circling away from anyone chasing them. You dive in with Rico and Will, Jane and Lucas and Wiconi going into the other car.

Rico pants heavily, looking around in terror.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay,” Will whispers, “We’re rescuing you, okay? It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Rico looks over at Will and nods, slowly, his eyes still wide.

“Your sisters are in there – Eleven and Fourteen and Seven – do you remember them?” you ask, frowning at Rico as the cars drive away.

Rico looks at you and nods, holding up his wrist wordlessly.

012

“Okay, this is fun chitchat, but I gotta *sprint the fuck out of here*, so if everyone could just *shut up* –“

You all do so as Dustin drives away rapidly, Max zooming ahead of you all in the other car. Cars follow you rapidly from the building, vans labeled with Department of Energy.

“Come on, Jane... come on...” you whisper, looking out the back, “Do it again... do the thing again...”

“She’s not going to do the thing again –“

“She has to do the thing again!”

“She’s too tired, we all are –“

“*She has to* –“

You watch in amazement as one of the vans skids to a stop, causing two others to crash into it. A fourth flips over, landing on its roof. The fifth swirls into the grass, and the sixth car can’t get past the mess.

“YEAH JANE!” You scream.

“JANE! JANE! JANE!” Will cheers.

“FUCK YEAH JANE!” Dustin laughs, and you all keep driving rapidly, back to the center of the city.

When you park in front of Mpilo’s apartment building, you rush out and pull Jane into a tight hug, giving her a huge kiss.

“Mike!” she squeaks, but she looks at you with a wide smile.

“I’m so proud of you –“

“I’m proud of me, too –“

“This is fun, but we’re ridiculously hot right now, and we should talk to Mpilo *fast* before we head up to Boston,” Wiconi says, slamming her car door and running to the building.

You all follow, Rico still in his hospital gown, Maria looking at him curiously.

The building is small and crowded, with many apartments all crammed into one small space. You eventually reach one of the ones on the middle levels, Jane knocking tiredly.

“Who is it?” A voice practically sings out from the room behind the door.

“Eleven, Seven, Twelve, Fourteen...”

The door opens rapidly, and a large man with very dark skin looks at you all with a grin. His black hair is woven into dreadlocks, and he has a small beard.

“Sisters! And brother,” he beams. He’s dressed in entirely black clothing from head to toe, much like Fumiko, but his face is turned into a wide grin.

“Come in! Come in! Oh – what a surprise – what a *surprise!*”

“You’re... okay with this?” Jane asks, frowning as everyone piles in.

“Of course! It is surprising though,” Mpilo frowns, “It is not the safest to be out and in a group like this –“

“No, it’s not,” Wiconi agrees, “But... you work for the government, right?”

“I do,” Mpilo beams again, “Nothing like having a potential zombie army at your disposal to intimidate the goons who owned you your whole life!”

Jane laughs quietly.

“At any rate, before we get into why you’re here, please, please – your freedom names. Surely you do not go by numbers anymore,” Mpilo beams, “I am Mpilo, no longer Four –“

He holds up his wrist, though, with a smile.

004

“I’m Jane,” Jane murmurs, “Eleven.”

“Wiconi... Seven...”

“I’m twelve,” Rico pauses, “They say my name is Rico.”

“Maria. Fourteen,” Maria mumbles, looking reluctant to say anything more.

“It is so good to see you all again. It has been too long,” Mpilo pauses, “And who are the rest of you?”

“Friends of Jane,” Wiconi introduces, “It’s... part of the story.”

“I’m Dustin.”

“Lucas.”

“Will.”

“Max.”

“Mike,” you murmur softly.

Mpilo looks at you with a frown.

“You... seem familiar, Mike.”

Your eyes widen.

“Uh –“

“I talk to the dead, too, you know. They still speak to me. Don’t say

much! Don't want to say much. But they speak to me," he frowns at you more, "Did you ever die?"

Everyone looks at Mpilo in shock.

"Uh... I don't think so," you mumble.

"Not even close?"

"Well... close..." you mumble even more, the words barely escaping from your mouth.

"Hmm. Close –"

"Mpilo," Jane snaps, "Stop."

Mpilo looks around at everyone's serious faces.

"Oh! Oh. I see. Yes, I see," Mpilo nods, "You tried to kill yourself."

"Mpilo!"

"Nothing to be ashamed of, Mike, nothing at all. Many people try. Usually they regret it. You don't remember, of course, that would break quite a few rules! But, you didn't want to go. You regretted it," Mpilo smiles, "Missed your Jane. Kept calling for her."

You feel like you're going to throw up.

"Do you hear... everyone... who is dead or dying?" Dustin squeaks.

"Yes. Oh don't worry about me, don't worry about me. I learned to tune it out eventually. Really brightened my life. But I get that this is a difficult subject?"

You look away from him.

"Yes, difficult subject. Well I'll stop talking about it. Jane, Wiconi, if you want to tell me why you're all here...?"

They all go into another room as you sit down on the ground and hold your hands over your face.

“Mike? Are you okay?”

Will is looking at you in worry.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” you mutter, trying to think about other things.

About the fact that you were almost done.

About the fact that you could go home soon.

You really want to go home now.

You miss your mom.

And Nancy.

And Bubbe.

And Zayde.

You miss everyone *so much*.

“I am very confused,” you hear Rico whisper behind you.

Maria nods next to him.

“Maria... do you understand everything we say?” Lucas asks quietly.
Maria nods again.

“That’s what I thought... because your whole thing,” he points to his head, “Is interpreting languages...”

Maria nods, and opens her mouth for a moment, before closing it again.

“I think she’s afraid of talking,” Dustin whispers.

Your heart breaks for her again.

“Rico? Are you okay?” Will asks quietly.

Rico looks at him, shrugging.

"I'm... confused," Rico repeats.

"I'll explain everything, c'mon," Dustin murmurs, and he leads Rico over to another corner of the room.

You keep sitting there, just staring out ahead.

"Mike?"

You look up as Lucas and Max sit on either side of you.

"Do you need to go home?" Lucas murmurs.

"No," you insist quietly, "No, I don't..."

"Are you sure?" Max murmurs, "We've been gone a long time, it's definitely been a lot."

"We're all at each other's throats, too," Lucas agrees, "I've fought more with Dustin the past two weeks than I've actually talked to him..."

"Yeah," you whisper, "But I'll be okay."

"If you're sure..."

"We're on the home stretch. I can make it. I just... need to decompress. When it's over," you murmur, "My thoughts are all over the place."

So all over the place that you can't even really register them.

You rest your head on Lucas' shoulder, and Max rests her head on your arm, and you just close your eyes and rest for a long time, trying to just organize your thoughts into something more similar to an actual coherent narrative.

Eventually everyone comes out, Mpilo looking over at you all.

"Firstly, I would like to say – you are all so brave! I am so impressed with all of you. The weirdness that you've been experiencing has been what my entire life has been," Mpilo pauses as Jane scurries out

from behind him, Wiconi walking out more slowly. She runs over to you and immediately rests her head on your knees, making you smile.

“Secondly – Mike.”

You look up in shock.

“I am sorry for bringing up your recent trauma. I understand the pain there,” Mpilo holds his hand over his chest, “And, honestly, that was very inconsiderate of me.”

“Uh –“

“But,” Mpilo turns around, smiling widely at everyone, “I am *very happy* to join you all! Being in Hawkins will be... a little weird...”

“Don’t you have a job? With the bad guys?” Max asks, frowning.

“Well, yes, but they’re scared of *me*, not the other way around,” Mpilo beams, “So... what are they going to do?”

Dustin grins at him.

“Do you have a car? Please tell me you have a car,” Lucas groans.

“I live in New York City,” Mpilo frowns.

Everyone watches him expectantly.

“No. No I do not.”

Everyone groans.

“Then I guess we’re cramming in again. This’ll be... fun...”

“Well, I’ll pack light, then –“

“Oh no,” Will groans quietly.

“So... five to a car,” Wiconi sighs, “Um... one small kid per car?”

“And one big adult per car,” Dustin grumbles.

“Alright. Let’s head out.”

You hold Jane’s hand tightly and she squeezes your back, looking up at you with worry.

Just one more to go.

JANUARY 5 1987

You all arrive in Boston the next day.

You took a pit stop to rest at a motel – you hate motels – and drive into the new city that morning, Mpilo talking eagerly and happily with everyone about his hobbies (Gothic-style painting) and his annoying coworkers (whom he is so happy to ditch).

“Alright, I know Renee already, so I’ll just... talk again,” Wiconi mutters, “Let’s just get this over with. I’m dead.”

“You weren’t in the snowstorm, though,” Dustin points out.

“I might as well have been, the number of times you’ve told the story,” Wiconi groans.

“I have not heard the story!” Mpilo shouts.

“NO!” Wiconi yells, whirling to face him, “No.”

“But –“

“No!”

You walk up to a small house, tiny and cute, though you don’t really pay attention to many of those details at this point.

You’re very dead.

Wiconi knocks on the door in a specific way, waiting at the edge of the doorway and shuffling her feet a little bit.

Eventually the door opens, and a girl walks out. She has dark skin, very curly black hair, and is wearing jeans and plaid. She snaps some bubblegum and looks at you all curiously.

“Hey Wiconi... who’s this... Wait... *Four?*”

Mpilo waves.

“It’s Mpilo now.”

“Right,” she frowns, “I’m Renee. Five. Whatever.”

She holds up her wrist.

005

“But I’m sure you all... knew that?” she asks, frowning. She then looks around at everyone, focusing more.

“Wait a second... Eleven,” she breathes, “And Twelve... and Fourteen...”

“Yup,” Jane sighs.

“What... how...”

“We have a lot to talk about,” Wiconi sighs.

Renee nods, frowning more, “You can just give me bullet points. I’ll figure the rest out.”

“You could figure it out wrong,” Jane points out.

Renee laughs.

“Sure, kid. I could. Come on in, I guess.”

Everyone files in, sitting around the room as Renee sits on her floor, crossing her legs and holding her hands up in a pose.

“What... are ya doing, sis?” Wiconi asks, grinning.

“Meditating,” Renee breathes, “Trying to calm my mind.”

“Calm your mind?” Jane asks curiously

“When you have as many thoughts going at any one time as I do,”

Renee breathes in slowly, "Sometimes, you need to try and erase them all away."

"Should... we wait? For you to be done? Before we start talking?" Dustin asks.

"No," Renee breathes out just as slowly, "Just, highlights. Like I said."

"Alright. Um. I tore open this dimension and connected it to another one," Jane begins.

"It unleashed a monster," you continue, nodding with her.

"That took me to that other dimension," Will murmurs.

"I escaped," Jane continues, "And found them."

"While we were looking for Will," Dustin continues.

"The Government Goons started to chase us around and we had to keep Jane hidden," you continue, wrapping your arm around Jane lovingly.

"But then we all came together to rescue Will," Jane continues, smiling over at you.

"Jane destroyed the monster! And fell into the other dimension," Lucas sighs.

"She came back out, but had to go into hiding," Will continues.

"Will was permanently connected to that place, though, and it was still open to us," you sigh.

"A big... shadow monster lives there. And it started to give Will bad... episodes. Where he'd be in that world," Lucas continues.

"He was possessed by the monster and it was trying to overtake Hawkins and, presumably, the world," Dustin sighs.

"We tried to fight him off, but we couldn't," Max mutters.

“Jane managed to close the gate. She came out of hiding,” you frown, “But the monster was still here.”

“The monster was in my lungs and Jane’s adoptive dad’s lungs,” Dustin pauses, “And we were coughing and infecting her.”

“It shut down my mind,” Jane murmurs, “Made me relive all the things that happened to me, and think about them.”

“She was trapped. And, turns out, y’all were made into psychics by bacteria, so... because Jane and I are a couple... I became one of you. So I rescued her,” you mumble.

“But the monster is still out there. And it wants to take over the world,” Jane sighs.

“So we’re gathering up you all and warning you, and hopefully, bringing as many of you home as possible,” Lucas finishes.

“The end,” Dustin says.

“Oh my *God*,” Max groans.

Renee sits there in silence. A slight breeze blows in from a window through her hair, and no one moves a muscle.

She’s mouthing quietly to herself.

Suddenly, her eyes open.

“Got it.”

“Okay?” Jane asks with a frown.

“That was more detail than I needed, but I would like to test this monster, and this dimension, myself,” Renee stands up, “So I’ll come with you.”

“For real?” Wiconi frowns, “You’ve never wanted to leave Boston before –“

“Apocalypse outweighs personal sense of security. Besides, I’ve been

alone a while. I think I'm more computer than human at this point," Renee frowns.

"Excellent!" Mpilo cheers.

"Oh my God, have you *always* been this cheerful?" Wiconi groans, holding her hands over her eyes.

Rico giggles quietly.

"No," Maria murmurs.

Everyone whirls around to face her in shock.

"In the Lab, he was very sad. Very," Maria pauses, "Would cry. A lot."

"How do you remember that? I'm eleven years older than you," Mpilo whispers.

Maria shrugs, frowning.

"She's not just a language translator, she's a language *interpreter*," Renee says, standing up, "She gets the *true* meaning behind words just as much as the *literal* meaning. She also can get it from objects. She probably doesn't remember anything."

Renee starts to grab things from around the room.

"But she can figure out what we're not saying from our words."

Maria nods, looking away.

"Don't worry Maria," Renee continues, grabbing a bag from a cabinet and stuffing things into it, wandering about her house as she talks, "If anyone will help you escape that head of yours, its me."

"Hey!" Mpilo shouts.

"*You* are a psycho case," Renee shouts, "No one should respond to the constant presence of death like that."

"I'd like to see *you* come up with a better coping strategy," Mpilo

mutters.

“I can come up with *two dozen!*”

“Asshole,” he grumbles.

“Right back at cha. I’ll be ready to go in five.”

“Five *minutes?*” Lucas shouts.

“Whatever you can’t pack in five minutes is not worth packing. Now let me work.”

You’re just glad you’re going to get out of there soon.

You just want to be home.

And, as Jane nestles against your shoulder, you know she’s glad, too.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have made a mistake.

This chapter was a mistake.

Please comment to make all 22.6k words worth it, thanks, and I love you all. Hopefully I’ll return from the dead soon.

34. Safety in the Storm

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for references to abuse & depictions of teenage sexuality

JANUARY 21 1987

JANE HOPPER

“Dad, *please* –“

“No! And don’t ask me tomorrow either!”

You groan and sit back in your chair.

You just want to leave the house for *five seconds*.

“House arrest sucks,” Will grumbles.

“Yeah, well, you kids should have thought of that before you went running all over the damn country,” Joyce shouts.

You grumble more, twisting your face into a frown.

“I just want to see that they’re settling in well,” you mutter after a while, pushing the peas on your plate with your fork.

“Yeah, well, you’re just going to have to tell them in your head!”

You nod, grumbling more inside.

“You’re lucky we waved off all your expenses on our cards as your holiday presents,” Joyce continues, angrily stabbing at her chicken, “You guys could be owing us a *lot of money* right now –“

“I said I’m going to start looking at scholarships soon,” you mumble.

“Yeah,” Will agrees.

“This isn’t about college! This is about you kids going around the

country, without adult supervision –“

“We had Wiconi with us for *most* of the trip,” Will mutters.

“*Wiconi does NOT COUNT!*”

You and Will look at each other, and return to eating silently. You’d had this argument for essentially every day since you’d gotten back, and it wasn’t really worth repeating at this point. When you finish dinner, you go to do your bird chores, looking over at Will in silent annoyance as he helps you manage them while you clean the cage.

“If they would just tell us when the house arrest would be over,” Will mutters as quietly as he can.

“Right?” you agree softly, “If I had an end date I’d shut up about it...”

“WHAT ARE YOU TWO WHISPERING ABOUT IN THERE?!”

“Nothing!” you shout in unison, looking at each other in worry.

“HURRY UP AND GO DO YOUR HOMEWORK!”

“Yes Hopper,” Will groans quietly.

You finish cleaning and go into your room with Eddie on your shoulder, sitting down and working on your history essay.

The longer no word of the Mind Flayer is had, the harder and harder you find it to focus on schoolwork. But you have to try anyway.

So you put on your headphones, listen to the Sex Pistols, and try to write your essay as quickly as you can so that you can actually do something relaxing.

You jump in your seat when you hear a rock clatter against your window.

You scurry over to it and open the window, peering out and down at Mike, who’s standing underneath it and looking at you with a grin.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” you smile, raising your eyebrow, “How are you here?”

“Mom and the Grandparents are all at a Synagogue charity thing,” Mike whispers, “So I snuck out to see you.”

“We see each other at school –“

“Yeah, but I can’t do *this* at school,” Mike says, and he leans up to kiss you very deeply, making your stomach swoop wildly.

“Mike!” you squeak, “Dad and Joyce are here –“

“We can be quiet –“

“Oh my God, go home,” you laugh.

Mike sticks his tongue out at you and looks down at his watch, groaning quietly.

“Five minutes? I’d have to leave in five minutes anyway.”

You look back over at the door and lock it with your mind, pulling Mike up into your room.

“Five minutes,” you whisper sternly, glaring at him a little.

He brushes the hair out of your face and grins at you, “Five minutes.”

It makes your glare melt into a wide smile as he leans in to kiss you again.

You’re still nervous about everything, and sometimes you get feelings and memories you wish you didn’t get.

But, between Mike’s patient understanding and your increasing comfort with everything...

You like to think you’re moving on.

JANUARY 26 1987

“Okay, you guys with your *knowledgeable parents* all think you have it bad, but you don’t even get to complain,” Max grunts at lunch, looking over at all of you angrily.

“Oh come on – “

“I’m grounded practically for life! And things are so stressful at home...”

“You’re not grounded for life, you’re grounded till Spring Break,” Dustin says, rolling his eyes, “*I’m grounded for life.*”

“You’re not grounded for life, you’re grounded till the summer!” Lucas shoots back, “*I’m grounded for life!*”

“You’re not grounded for life, you’re just grounded until the start of next school year,” you shake your head tiredly, “*We’re all grounded for life because our parents knew what we were doing!*”

“They still haven’t given you all an end date?” Max asks seriously.

You all nod together, Will and Mike and you making identical expressions of pain.

“Well in theory that means it could end any time!” Lucas shouts, “I’m doomed! I’m doomed to a long summer of *test prep courses!*”

“You’ll survive,” Dustin snorts.

“I’d like to see *you* study for the SAT *all summer* –“

“Thankfully, I have my job at the Animal Shelter to help me.”

“I swear to God, if you fall in love with another cat –“

“I won’t fall in love with any cats!” Dustin protests, “Besides, I’ve tried to stop doing that. There’s no one I can bring them home to.”

“Remember when you thought you’d use a cat to woo Tiffany Bristol?” Mike laughs.

“I maintain that was a sound strategy –“

“She’s allergic to cats!”

“The right woman for me won’t be allergic to cats.”

“Then maybe you should *ask* whomever you’re giving the cat too *whether or not they’re allergic to cats* –“

“One day, there will be a beautiful woman, who just needs a rough around the edges street cat to love, whom I will give this cat to, and she will fall instantly in love with me –“

“One of these days,” Lucas says, glaring at Dustin, “I will legitimately hit you for this sort of thing.”

Max gets up suddenly, walking away from the table rapidly. Everyone watches her go, your face falling.

“Lucas, you shouldn’t joke about that,” you whisper.

“I know,” Lucas frowns, looking upset with himself, “I should go talk to her –“

“I’ll talk to her first,” you insist, standing up and following Max out of the cafeteria. You follow her into the girl’s bathroom, where she’s leaning against the counter, her face in her hands.

“Max?” you murmur quietly.

“Oh – Jane – sorry –“

She wipes off her eyes and smiles weakly.

“I just needed a minute –“

“Max,” you say, glaring at her a little.

Her face falls.

“What?”

“Do you want to talk about it?” you ask quietly.

“Not really,” Max mutters.

You sigh.

“Okay. It’s just... we’ve all been really worried about you. For a long time.”

“Yeah, well,” Max shrugs, “I’m not suicidal, or coughing up black shit, or repressing memories of childhood sexual abuse, or dealing with the fact that I got possessed and forced to betray my family, so, it doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” you insist, walking over to Max and putting your hand on her shoulder, “Max –“

“It doesn’t, okay? I don’t even talk to Lucas about it.”

You frown a little more.

“You should... talk to someone...”

She shakes her head, sighing.

“What is there even to talk about?”

“Well... how bad it is, for one. And for another, if we need to get you out of there,” you murmur.

“That’s not going to happen –“

“Max –“

“I can’t leave my mom alone with him. Because then she’ll be next.”

You both look at each other silently for another minute.

Lunch period is going to end soon.

“Max, please talk to me.”

She takes a deep breath and looks at you sadly.

“My step-dad is an abusive asshole. You know this.”

“Yeah,” you mutter.

"He used to beat up Billy. Then, when Billy moved away, he started to beat me up. So, if I leave, he'll beat up Mom."

"You can't know that –"

"I can know that. He uses family as a punching bag. What more is there to get? He still doesn't know about me and Lucas, you know," Max wipes off one of her eyes and looks away from you, "My Mom knows, but we are still hiding it from him."

"Can your mom divorce him?" you ask quietly.

"I don't think she wants to. Two divorces? Talk about something people will look down on you for," Max glares down at her shoes, "Why she keeps falling in love with jerks is beyond me."

"Is your actual Dad like this, too?" you whisper.

"Not as bad. At least to me. But I think he hit Mom more," Max takes a deep breath, "Which is why a husband who hits only the kids and not you is an upgrade, I guess."

"Max..."

The bell rings.

"Come on. I've got AP US and I can't be late to that," Max sighs, grabbing her books and walking past you. You watch her go with a frown, worry touching every part of you.

You only know how to deal with this stuff by running away from it.

JANUARY 30 1987

"Alright, we're off to Shabbat dinner with the Levinsons. You two will be okay?" Joyce asks, looking at you and Dad seriously.

"Course we will!" Dad says, beaming, "We've got the birds, we got some good books –"

"I'd *like* to watch TV," you mutter.

Dad glares at you.

“We have a *memory* which lets us *recall* that we are *grounded* –“

You grumble more.

“Alright,” Joyce nods, “Be home soon.”

They leave, the door to the house closing behind them.

“I would have liked to go,” you mutter.

“Jane –“

“Why can’t I?” you demand, glaring at Dad.

“Because you aren’t Jewish. If you want to become Jewish, you can. But, for now, you haven’t decided. We’ve been over this,” Dad explains.

“But I could go to Shabbat dinner before!”

“You weren’t grounded before,” Dad rolls his eyes, “The point is that you’re being punished, and only a religious excuse will let you get out of that punishment for Shabbat Dinner. Since you aren’t Jewish, you don’t have that reason, and Shabbat Dinner is a *treat*, not a right.”

You glare at him more.

“Fine. I’m going to become Jewish then.”

Dad rolls his eyes again.

“You aren’t going to convert to Judaism so that you can get out of being *grounded* for an *evening*.”

“An evening every *week*.”

“You realize converting takes years, so by the time you’re done, your grounding will be over,” Dad says with a smirk.

“So you admit my grounding *has an end date*?”

He scowls.

“In all seriousness, kid, that’s not the reason to become Jewish.”

You sigh.

“I know.”

“You told me back in September that you don’t know what you think and that you needed more time to figure it out, I remember.”

“Yeah...”

He looks at you, his hands under his chin, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Right now?” you frown, “I don’t know...”

“That’s alright, kiddo.”

You sit there, thinking to yourself.

Your thoughts swirling around your head.

Not spiraling.

But swirling.

“I just... I have so much trouble understanding it.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“What the heck is *any* of this? It makes no sense to me. God, no God. Jesus just a man, Jesus God? Bread is... flesh? Chosen People? What does it all *mean*?” you ask grumpily, glaring out in front of yourself.

“Maybe you’ll never figure out what you think. I think that’s okay,” Dad murmurs.

“Maybe,” you pause, frowning more, “I just... I don’t know.”

“I would like to say something, if that’s okay?”

You nod.

“First of all, I think talking to people who belong to different religions and things is the best way to try and understand it,” Dad says, “Both religious leaders and just regular folks.”

You nod again.

“Second of all... not going to lie to you, kiddo, but you always seem really happy when you go with Mike to Jewish things. And being Jewish is more about the things you *do* than the stuff you *believe*,” Dad finishes.

You frown.

“But am I happy because I like the things, or because I’m doing them with Mike?”

“That’s a good question,” Dad agrees, sitting back in his chair and holding his chin in his hands, “Do you want to test it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you want to do some things from various religions – not just Judaism – and see if you like them? Trial by doing?”

You purse your lips together in thought.

“Maybe?”

“Well, think on it. And you can also decide religion isn’t for you.”

“Is that what you decided?” you ask softly.

“It has been, yeah,” Dad nods.

“But not anymore?”

“Truthfully, I dunno. My first wife wasn’t religious. I was raised in a Methodist church down the road, but dropped it after Vietnam. Didn’t feel real anymore,” Dad pauses, “Wife didn’t like it either. Then my daughter died... and... it felt like I was right.”

You nod, trying to not let yourself cry like you always did when you thought about how much Dad suffered and this girl you'd never meet.

"But now I've been with Joyce a while. As friends and now... as whatever we are," Dad says, "And how Judaism has helped her work through all this weird shit with the Upside Down..."

You grin at him.

"Well, it's making me think about it more. I still think I'm going to stay what I am right now. But I am thinking about it," Dad finishes.

"Can we think about it together?" you ask softly.

He smiles at you.

"I think that's a great idea."

You squeeze his hand, and he squeezes yours, the two of you going back to reading books in comfortable silence – apart from squawking birds.

F E B R U A R Y 1 1 9 8 7

"Hey shithead!"

You grin happily, letting in Wiconi, and Mpilo, and Rico, and Maria, and Renee into the house, looking back over at Dad and grinning at him.

"Hi shithead," you grin back at Wiconi as she ruffles your hair.

"This is a meeting for *business*. They are still *grounded*," Dad says gruffly.

"Sure, sure," Wiconi agrees.

"How's the cabin working out for you all? Isn't it too crowded?" Joyce asks seriously, giving them all cups of tea – except Maria, who gets juice. Maria sits in a corner, watching everyone in fascination.

"I optimized the sleeping space through some rearranging and

managed to construct some bunk beds for the purpose of child sleeping habits,” Renee says, shrugging, “Not a problem.”

“Still...”

“Oh it’s definitely crowded,” Mpilo agrees, “But we’ve had worse!”

“Yeah, when we were *small*,” Wiconi mutters.

You giggle at that and Wiconi grins at you.

“I just don’t know if you guys should be in a larger house,” Dad sighs.

“Well, I’m going to talk to this Doctor Owens this week and hopefully wield my powers of persuasion!” Mpilo beams.

“Your powers are weird amounts of insensitivity to death, dumbass –“

“*And* the ability to have a zombie army at my disposal like that,” he snaps his fingers, “Which is why I got to do what I wanted in the *first place*.”

“They’re going to want Maria and Rico back,” Dad mutters.

“Well, we’re working on a plan with that,” Wiconi says.

“It’s simple. We tell them that they can still monitor the children as they wish as long as they are given freedom, safety, and get to live where they wish,” Renee says.

Rico doesn’t look happy about this.

“Alternatively, and I’m *just* throwing this out there,” Wiconi mutters, “We could just burn the entire department to the ground.”

“No,” Renee snaps.

“What about yes?”

“*No*.”

“But... yes?”

“No!”

“Have you *considered* yes?”

“I consider every possibility to every situation. *Yes I have considered it* you imbecile –“

“So you think it’s a good idea!”

“*No I do not.*”

Rico and Maria are giggling loudly.

“Well I don’t think it’s a good idea to force the kids to be experimented on against their wishes,” Wiconi mutters.

“I just don’t see another option –“

Dad sighs, “Is there any point to me asking if I could think about it?”

Renee smiles patronizingly.

“Not really, but I’ll humor you if you want.”

Dad glares a little bit, but nods, sitting back in his chair and thinking.

“I just don’t think it’s fair to the kids. That it’s child cruelty.”

Renee sighs.

“We have to make sacrifices from time to time.”

“Then you sacrifice yourself,” Dad mutters, “Don’t sacrifice someone else.”

“The kids are who they want –“

“I dunno,” Will frowns, “They might want their supercomputer back.”

Renee glares.

“I don’t feel like having to break out again –“

"But you wouldn't have to break out," Mpilo points out, "You'd have the same deal those kids would."

"Hell, I'll even volunteer, rather than have the kids do it," Wiconi agrees.

Renee glowers a bit more.

"Fine."

"Thank you," Rico murmurs. Maria nods rapidly next to him.

Renee's face softens.

"Of course, you guys."

"So tomorrow Mpilo, Renee and I will go up and offer to be test subjects s'long as they leave the kids alone and let us live our lives outside the lab," Wiconi frowns, "But I'm bringing a gun just in case."

"If you think I'm not coming *with* you kids –"

"I'm twenty-two," Mpilo says, frowning.

"And I'm twenty-one," Renee chimes in.

"You're kids," Dad says firmly, "At any rate, Sam listens to me. Together we might be able to protect you all, with minimal threatening with powers."

Wiconi grins, "Where's the fun of that?"

Dad just groans in response.

F E B R U A R Y 4 1 9 8 7

You wake up screaming in the middle of the night.

This isn't a new thing for you.

In fact it's a relatively normal and regular occurrence.

But now you can't stop crying.

And you can't seem to stop shaking.

You just wish you could stop?

For maybe five seconds.

So that you could calm down and go back to sleep.

But instead you just hold your face in your hands and cry and cry and cry and you can't really seem to stop.

Sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob –

“Jane?”

You look up to the door open, Will and Dad and Joyce all standing in it, looking at you in concern.

“U-um –“

“What's wrong?” Dad murmurs, running forward to you and sitting on the edge of your bed, holding your hands in his.

“Nightmare,” you whisper, ‘Really bad nightmare.’

Dad pulls you into a hug and you sob into his chest, trying to get yourself to stop and being unable to.

“Do you want to talk about it, kiddo? Or do you just want to try and go back to sleep?”

“I d-d-d-don't know,” you stammer, “I can't stop c-c-rying –“

“Do you need Mike?” Will whispers softly.

You look up at Dad, pleadingly, your body still sobbing against your will.

Dad lets out a heavy sigh.

“I'll go call Karen,” Joyce murmurs, leaving the room. You keep sobbing, holding your face in your hands again.

“Can you talk about it with me in the meantime?” Dad asks softly.

You swallow heavily, sniffing more and trying to breathe, but still being unable to. You just wish everything would stop spinning for a few seconds.

Stop.

Stop.

Stop.

Stop.

Stop.

“I d-d-dreamt about P-papa,” you gasp out, still crying heavily.

“Oh geez,” Dad sighs.

“He was looking f-f-for me –“

“I promise, kid, he’s not looking for you –“

“He was in the dream!” you shout, sniffing, “He was in the dream. And he took M-M-Mike away from me, t-t-too –“

“Oh geez,” Dad repeats, looking horrified.

“I’m s-s-s-so scared, Dad, I’m so scared –“

“I know, Jane. I know. I wish I knew what to say.”

You cry harder, burying your face in his arm and finding yourself unable to slow down.

“Do you want me to tell you what I tell people who come back from the army?”

You nod, looking up at him and sniffing more.

“I’m warning you, kiddo, this is what I tell adults, about a hard situation. If you want me to tell you what I tell kids when they’re

scared –“

“No. Adult spiel. Please.”

He nods, kissing your forehead, making you feel safer for just a second.

“Alright... here goes. This sucks. It sucks a lot.”

You manage a laugh, hiccupping a little bit.

“And there really isn’t a silver lining. This is scary, there’s nothing that can be done about it, and it’s as dangerous as you fear.”

You cry a little more.

“But, the fact that you’re aware of that means that you can at least mentally prepare yourself. You know that things could get rough in the near future. That you aren’t really safe. That means you are on high alert – which *will* help you in the long run.”

You nod weakly.

“You are so very very brave for getting as far as you have. You have done so many things so many other people wouldn’t be able to do. And even though the future is terrifying... even though you’re more scared than you thought possible... nothing that could come is any worse than things you’ve already faced.”

You snort.

“The apocalypse?”

“Kid, you’ve already faced the apocalypse. You closed the gate. And no matter what that awful monster throws at you, you’ll be able to do it again.”

You nod, firmly.

You can always do it again.

You can face both of them again.

The monster and the monster.

"These nightmares... they aren't ever going to go away. I wish I could say they will. I really do. But they don't."

You nod, sniffing softly.

"You just gotta remind yourself, whenever you wake up, that it's not real. That it's all in your head. That right now, you are safe, you are okay, and you're going to keep getting better. Okay?"

You nod again, still crying, but feeling like eventually you will be able to stop. Dad holds you to him, comforting you and murmuring these words over and over again, until you look up and see Mike in the doorway.

"Uh... thanks for letting me help, Hop," he murmurs awkwardly.

Dad gets up, letting Mike take his place, and looks at him sternly.

"No funny business."

"Yes sir."

Dad nods in satisfaction and leaves the room, leaving you and Mike in complete darkness. You lie down and he holds you as you do so, the two of you falling asleep slowly as your sobs finally come to a stop.

FEBRUARY 10 1987

"Not going to lie to you, Janey, this is the last place I ever thought I'd return to," Renee grumbles angrily.

"Yeah," you sigh, "I'm sorry."

"The Lab's gone, at least," Wiconi points out.

"The *Lab* might be gone, but it's still Hawkins. The trees are the same. The atmosphere's the same. And going to meet Doctor Owens is reminiscent enough that I'm annoyed. Constantly," Renee mutters.

“Weren’t you *already* annoyed constantly?” Mpilo asks seriously.

Renee glares at him.

Mpilo grins back.

“Alright, a question for a question, shithead,” Renee pauses, “Exactly how many dead people can you raise up as zombies at any given time?”

“Biggest number I’ve managed is fifteen, but I wasn’t under anything resembling stress,” Mpilo pauses, “I probably could do more.”

“Fucking shit. That’s terrifying.”

“What are they like?” Rico asks curiously.

“They just kind of hobble along and do what I ask them to do. They can’t really think for themselves,” Mpilo pauses, “I mean, they *can*. But their souls aren’t connected to their bodies anymore –“

“Please don’t tell me souls are a real thing.”

“Oh they are! They definitely are.”

“That’s comforting.”

“All living things have them!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me –“

“They do! But animals and plants and things don’t think like people do. So, even though I feel all of them leave this world, it’s only people I really get a glimpse of, really,” Mpilo beams.

“The fact that you are not *completely insane* is never going to make sense to me,” Renee mutters.

“Seconded,” Wiconi agrees.

“It gives me a unique perspective, I think, rather than insanity,” Mpilo shrugs.

"Anyways... you were explaining what the zombies are like," Rico says, frowning.

"Right. So I can command their bodies, but their souls are still... wherever souls go. I know nothing about it, frankly. They refuse to tell me. But I can talk to their souls, if I need to, and sometimes they tell me to put them back in the damn ground," Mpilo laughs.

"Okay, okay, *wait*. Wait. *Every living thing?*" Renee screeches.

"Yes."

"Life has been around for billions of years –"

"Oh, has it?"

"You are hearing quadrillions of souls –"

"Again, everything that isn't a human thought is essentially white noise."

Renee just groans, resting her head on the table.

"What," Dad says, holding his face in his hands, "Does *any* of this have to do with finding a new house?"

"Oh, right," Wiconi groans.

"That's why we're having this pow-wow –"

"Oi, that's *offensive!*"

"I'm sorry –"

"Fuck right you are."

You just keep giggling in your corner of the table.

"*You* are not helping," Dad snaps, but he's smiling at you while he says it.

You just grin in response.

You love your weird family.

FEBRUARY 14 1987

"I can't believe your Dad eased up on your grounding after all," Mike says, grinning as you both enter the gym of the high school.

"I can't believe your *Mom* eased up on the grounding after all," you parrot back, sticking your tongue out at him.

"It's the Valentine's Day Dance. Guess they decided to cut us some slack," Mike laughs.

"It's a bummer the rest couldn't come, though," you sigh.

"Well, to be fair, Will didn't have anyone he wanted to go with, Dustin didn't get asked by anyone, and Max and Lucas both couldn't convince their parents to unground them for one night," Mike says, shrugging, "Besides... it's nice to just have time to the two of us for a bit."

"Yeah," you smile at him, "I love them, but that road trip was rough."

"Agreed," Mike laughs. He spins you around as you dance together, making you laugh more.

"How are your nightmares?"

"The same... yours?"

"The same," Mike sighs. He leans in and rests his forehead on yours, breathing in slowly and closing his eyes. You close yours, too, and for a moment the only thing you think about is the music, and Mike.

Mike and music.

You breathe in, slowly, and feel yourself relax for the first time in a while.

Everything just washes over you.

Like gentle waves.

“Jane?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

You smile, though your eyes are still closed.

“I love you, too.”

“C’mere,” he murmurs, and you open your eyes to see him pull you closer, making your heart swoop in your chest. You kiss him deeply, the two of you holding tight to each other as you sway on the dance floor.

Someone whoops at you in the distance.

You blush, furiously, and pull away from Mike, looking up at him with a giggle.

He giggles with you, before returning to dancing, holding you and swaying slowly.

You so rarely have moments like this.

Moments when everything else just ebbs away.

Moments where, just for a moment.

You can pretend you’re normal.

A normal teenager, living a normal life.

With your normal boyfriend, in your normal town.

Just for a second.

Before you’re reminded.

First, by the fact that you love your boyfriend much more deeply and unconditionally than a normal teenager should.

Second, by the fact that you feel out of place in this gym much more

than a normal teenager should.

Third, by the fact that there's always that worry in the back of your mind, much more worry than what is normal for a teenager.

And, finally, the last nail in the coffin – the deep sadness.

But then you look into his eyes.

And he looks into yours.

And for a moment.

You're comforted by the fact that you're not alone.

You lean in and kiss him again, and the two of you stay like that for long time, just kissing and swaying.

Letting every worry melt around you for just a second.

As much as you love your family, no one else can make you feel quite like this.

You feel like you can trust him with anything.

"Hey," he murmurs after a while, "Wanna go outside for a minute? I have something for you."

You look up at him and grin, nodding. He beams at you and takes your hand, walking out to the hallway, going to his locker. He pulls a bag out of it and then leads you away to the back of the school, pulling the objects out of the bag.

"I brought food!" he says, beaming, "I mean, I stored food. It's Tu B'Shevat. New year for trees. So I eat specific fruit and stuff. And I thought you'd like the break from... people and also the food."

You grin at him, "Okay, what food?"

"Well, here we have some wheat bread, some figs, dates, grapes, raisins, oranges, bananas, pomegranates, and some olives. Here," he says, handing you an olive. You pop it into your mouth, and beam at

him while he beams at you, the two of you laughing as you feed each other the bits of fruit and bread. You throw some grapes into his mouth and he catches them, grinning triumphantly as you laugh.

You're starting to run low on fruit, and it's freezing outside, the chilly winds rushing through you and making you scoot closer to Mike on the step. He wraps his arm around you and hurriedly polishes off the food, giving you grapes and dropping them into your mouth.

You blush furiously when you accidentally nibble on his finger in an attempt to eat the raisin faster.

"I... uh..." Mike squeaks.

"Um..."

"Let's... go back in."

You nod, blushing furiously, as you both go inside, laughing a little as the tension breaks with the warm air of the building.

F E B R U A R Y 1 8 1 9 8 7

"I can't believe my parents are actually letting me out of the house for this," Lucas laughs, throwing a present Mike's way as he catches it.

"I guess birthdays count for the breaking of the grounding," Mike grins, "I'm glad you all could make it!"

"It's definitely... unexpected," Max agrees, frowning, "But... I'm not complaining."

"Party it up!" Dustin shouts, moving his arms up and down, "We're gonna *raise* the *roof*!"

"Please just... stop talking," Max groans, holding her face in her hands.

"I can't believe I came from Bloomington for this," Nancy snorts, but she's grinning at you all from the back of the room.

Everyone's packed into the Levinson house for Mike's birthday party – from his family, to your family, to the party, to the other psychics. Everyone is there, and the house is more crowded than its ever been.

"Seriously though, when will our draconian punishment end?" Will asks grumpily.

"When we fee like you've been punished enough," Joyce says sternly.

"If it's any consolation, if I had had a say in this situation –"

"Yes, Renee, I know, you would have discouraged them from doing it," Joyce rolls her eyes, "You're not in trouble here."

"I'm aware –"

"Alright let's get this show on the road!" Zayde shouts, grinning at everyone, "We've got games to play and presents to open and cake to eat!"

"Heck yeah," Wiconi grins, causing Bubbe to roll her eyes and whack her upside the head.

"We have discussed your sarcasm, young lady –"

"You aren't my real grandma –"

"As long as you are a part of *this* apocalypse family, you are. Now sit down, we've got kosher-style pizza and cake!"

"This basically just means none of the pizzas have meat on them, doesn't it?" Wiconi groans.

"It is *my* grandson's birthday –"

"I just can't believe you're sixteen," Mike's Mom sighs, looking whistful, "What has happened to time?"

"Well, I control it now," Mike says, grinning and wiggling his fingers at her, "So clearly I'm making it go faster so I can be an *aaaduuuult!*"

"Oh God, anything but that," Mike's Mom jokes.

"I would like to announce, though, on this most important of birthdays," Mike pauses, "That I think I'm comfortable enough to do some more practicing, and then get my driver's license after that."

"Really?" you gasp softly.

"Are you serious, zeisele?" Bubbe murmurs.

"Well, I'm terrified," Mike pauses, his face white, "But... I can't spend my whole life not driving. And Doc Owens thinks I should try to ease into it, and Mom thinks it's a good idea, and Hop thinks I can handle it, so..."

"Well we're very proud of you," Zayde says, hugging him tightly.

You frown at Dad.

"When am *I* going to start driving?"

Dad groans very, very loudly.

"What? I need to learn!"

"Seconded," Wiconi says from the back of the room.

"Oh don't encourage her –"

"But she should learn, Jim," Joyce frowns, "What if there's an emergency?"

"It's not hard! We can help teach you!" Dustin cheers.

"You absolutely *will not* –"

"Oh come on –"

"It's illegal *for one* –"

"At any rate," Mike's mom shouts above the fray, looking amused, "Mike will go at it very slowly, but eventually we're hoping he'll be able to drive again."

Mike beams, and you beam at him happily.

“Alright, enough chit chat. Food!” Zayde cheers, “Pizza time!”

“Yay!”

Everyone hangs out and chit chats, eating pizza and laughing. You keep checking between your old family and your new family, making sure that they get along – but nothing bad seems to be happening.

You’re so relieved.

“Okay but seriously,” Wiconi says, laughing with Jonathan, “The Clash? Seriously?”

“Oh come on –“

“Have you *considered* the Cure –“

“Let me live, Wiconi –“

You walk over to Maria, who’s sitting in a corner, watching everyone talk with wide, curious eyes. You sit next to her and smile at her, and she smiles back at you, though nervously.

“How are you?” you ask softly.

She shrugs in response.

“Is there anything I can do? To help?”

She looks up at you and frowns.

“Can I have more pizza?”

You grin and nod, walking over to grab a slice and bring it back to Maria.

“In all seriousness, Dustin, I’m worried about you,” you hear Lucas from across the room. You turn to listen, Maria leaning forward with you.

“Oh come on –“

“You haven’t had a huge, debilitating crush on anyone in *ages* –“

“Yes I have!”

“Name *one*.”

“Uh...”

“Wait, Dusty is a hopeless romantic?” WIconi jokes, walking over and ruffling his curly hair, “Tell me more about this.”

“Oh man. This is before you came here, apparently,” Lucas glares at Dustin, “But Dustin would have a crush on a different girl every month –“

“I would *not* –“

“Yes you would,” Mike laughs, “You totally would.”

“Remember when you wouldn’t come study because you were hopelessly in love?” you laugh.

Dustin glares at you.

“Thanks, Jane –“

“Anytime,” you grin. Maria giggles next to you.

“But seriously, you haven’t had a crush on anyone in ages! You’re turning into Will –“

“I have had crushes,” Will mutters.

“Either way, he’s not *telling* us if he has one or not –“

“It’s alright to not have crushes,” Max says, rolling her eyes.

“I mean, yeah, except for Dustin this is *new* –“

“I don’t need to have constant crushes, man, let me live!”

“I’m just saying it’s a worrying change in behavior –“

“Look, I have a crush, I’m just not *telling you*,” Dustin mutters, “Leave me alone.”

“Wait wait wait,” Mike says, jumping up and grinning at Dustin, “*You have a SECRET crush?*”

“This is a new development,” Max snorts.

“Oh Lord, I should *not* have said anything –“

“Yeah man that was a bad call,” Wiconi laughs.

“Just, forget it –“

“Tell us!”

“Tell us!”

“Tell us!”

“Tell us!”

“Tell us!”

“Guys, leave Dustin alone,” Will says, glaring at the rest of you chanting.

“Thank you, Will,” Dustin mutters.

“Fine, fine,” Lucas sighs, “You promise you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Dustin has a weird look on his face, “Yeah.”

“You don’t... look okay,” you say, frowning.

“It’s just never going to happen, ya know? So I gotta work through it,” Dustin shrugs, “That’s all.”

“Good luck man,” Will says, nodding, “I know that feeling...”

“Okay, wait,” Lucas pauses, “Now you’ve revealed you have crushes _“

“Oh no, why is this happening –“

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Max says, rolling her eyes.

“Why don’t you ever tell anyone, though?” Mike asks.

Will groans.

“I don’t feel like talking about this...”

“Then let’s drop it, yeah?” Joyce says from the back of the room.

“Thanks, Mom,” Will nods.

You smile at him encouragingly, though, and Will looks from you to around the room, his eyes resting briefly on Rico, before continuing around.

“Um... okay,” Will takes a deep breath, “Uh... shit... I don’t...”

“You don’t have to,” you murmur, “I just think it’ll go okay.”

“Don’t have to what?” Mike asks in confusion.

Will takes another deep breath, “Um... the reason I haven’t told you all... is ‘cause...”

He breathes in one more time.

“Cause I’m gay...”

There’s a brief silence.

Before everyone cheers.

“I knew you could say it, buddy!” Dustin says.

“Nice, Will!” Max grins.

“Welcome to the club,” Wiconi encourages.

“Honestly, not surprised, but glad you could finally tell us,” Lucas chimes in.

“I’m so proud of you, honey,” Joyce says, hugging him tightly.

“Now I have twice the number of guys to threaten if they hurt my

kid,” Dad says, a dreamy look on his face, “I’ve dreamt of this moment –“

“Oh geez,” Will groans.

“You don’t threaten me *that* much...” Mike mutters.

“Shush, let me have this, kid –“

“It’s funny because I definitely had a huge crush on you in middle school,” Will admits, “But, there’s only so much lovey-dovey stuff between you and Jane that I can take, apparently –“

“Oh my God, you totally *did* have a crush on Mike, didn’t you?” Dustin gasps, “Wow, I am an... idiot...”

“That’s... funny,” Mike says, frowning.

“Why?” Will asks, “I don’t *anymore* –“

“No, no, I’m not bothered by that. I just... may or may not have had a crush on you too?” Mike admits.

You look at him in shock.

“You *did*?”

“You can have crushes on more than one person,” Mike points out.

“Fair enough,” you frown, “You don’t anymore, do you?”

“Nah –“

“Wait we are glossing over something very important,” Dustin says, “Mike, are you...”

“I’m bisexual,” Mike says, looking at you worriedly and you nod.

“Really?” Bubbe asks.

“Yeah – sorry to rain on your parade, Will –“

“Nah, it’s fine. Honestly it cheers me up to know that it’s *possible* for

someone to have a crush on me –“

“I mean, it didn’t last very long, but –“

“Hey, I’m proud of you, son,” Mike’s Mom says, walking over to him and hugging him, “That took a lot of bravery to say.”

“Three cheers for Mike and Will!” Dustin says.

“Hip hip!”

“Hooray!”

“Hip hip!”

“Hooray!”

“Hip hip!”

“HOORAY!”

“Stop it, guys,” Mike laughs, but he’s grinning.

“Course we accept you,” Bubbe murmurs, hugging him tightly, “And we’re very proud of you for saying it.”

“I mean, it doesn’t matter much, cause of Jane, but –“

“It matters a great deal,” Zayde says, smiling.

“It’s about who you are,” Renee agrees.

“And us accepting that,” Mike’s Mom continues.

“Besides,” Joyce pauses, “You could always have a boyfriend in addition to Jane.”

Mike frowns.

“Really?”

You frown too.

You don't exactly like the idea.

"I mean, only if everyone involved was okay with it," Joyce shrugs.

"I just don't think *I* would be... I like just being with Jane," Mike continues, looking over at you and smiling at you reassuringly.

You smile back at him.

"Joyce, where on *Earth* did you learn about that?" Mike's Mom asks, her eyebrows raised.

"Er..."

"We might as well say it," Nancy mutters.

"Nance –"

"This is the apocalypse family, no one should judge us –"

"What... is going on?" Wiconi asks, smirking.

"Fuck," Steve grumbles.

Jonathan closes his eyes shut tightly before muttering, "Uh... Nancy... Steve... and I... are a thing..."

"A thing?" Dad asks, smirking at them.

"We're all... together..."

"Wait, how long has *this* been going on?" Dustin asks, looking in confusion.

"Uh... Since Mike tried to kill himself..."

"You're *kidding*," Mike gasps.

"Yeah... Nance was really upset..." Steve takes a deep breath, "Frankly, I was too..."

"So we all went to Steve's apartment..." Jonathan grimaces, "We don't need to go over this..."

"How the *heck* did you keep it hidden for so long?" Will asks.

"Uh... we really haven't been... you guys just haven't noticed..."

"We all held hands when Jane was comatose," Nancy points out.

"Whenever they visit they come over to my apartment nine times out of ten," Steve agrees.

"We're always hugging each other," Jonathan continues.

"Um... I've definitely kissed both of them in front of you guys," Nancy says.

"And Steve and I have kissed each other, I mean, we tried to hide it, but..." Jonathan blushes.

"And I'm always doing favors for the both of them here," Steve finishes.

"I guess... I just figured you all were really close friends," Dad says, looking extremely embarrassed.

"I mean, that's how it started..."

"But you and Steve broke up?" Mike asks Nancy.

"Turns out we work better with Jonathan in the relationship than as a couple," Nancy murmurs, "I've... My feelings for them are different but they... I dunno... complement each other?"

"Did you know about this?" Mike's Mom asks Joyce.

"Er... I might have walked in on them once," Joyce says, grimacing, "Took some time to get used to, but... ultimately it's not weirder than anything else we've dealt with."

"Fair point," Bubbe laughs.

"You aren't mad?" Nancy asks.

"No, of course not," Zayde says, "Just have to get used to it."

“Well this has been a weird afternoon,” Dad says, “Let’s... move on to presents.”

Mike receives a haul of video games, books, roleplaying manuals, and similar things from everyone around him. You walk with him to his room when everyone starts talking, wanting to give him his gift in private.

“You’re okay, right?” Mike asks softly.

You nod.

“I know you don’t like him now.”

“I liked him before we became a couple... it went away pretty much instantly when we got together...”

“It’s okay, Mike. I promise.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” you reassure, leaning in to kiss him, “I’m not some dumb jealous thirteen year old anymore.”

Mike beams at you.

“I know you and I are just us, and if you wanted anything different you’d tell me, rather than hurt me,” you continue, “I know that.”

“And I know you’d do that, too,” Mike agrees.

“I mean... I’ve never had a crush on anyone but you... but hypothetically, yes,” you agree.

“Really? Never?”

“Nope.”

“Well, that’s okay,” Mike kisses you on the forehead, “‘Cause you have a crush on me.”

You giggle.

“A big one.”

“Oh no! How embarrassing for you.”

You stick your tongue out at him and he kisses you, making you giggle.

“Don’t worry. I have a huge crush on you too.”

“Oh no!” you giggle. He grins back and you kiss again, both laughing with each other quietly.

“Here,” you say, pulling out your present from your pocket. He opens it and beams at you, holding up a small locket.

“What is it?”

“Open it.”

He opens the locket to see a picture of the two of you inside.

“Thank you, Jane,” he murmurs, putting it on and sticking the locket under his sweater, “I love it.”

“I love you,” you whisper, and you both kiss each other deeply, ignoring the sounds of the party outside.

“I love you,” he murmurs back, and you hug together for a long time, just enjoying resting in each other’s arms.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't even know what to say anymore except I totally dropped like a million hints that Stoncy was happening?! So hopefully it's not that much of a shock

I am a tired potato who has written a lot and loves all of you guys for your wonderful comments on the last chapter <3 <3 <3 <3 I really appreciate it!!! Please comment on this one ^_

35. Time and Space

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for mentions of vomit, domestic abuse & teenage sexuality

MARCH 2 1987

MIKE LEVINSON

You wake up in a cold sweat

It's the third time this week

You can't stop panting, and you hold your head in your hands, trying to breathe slower.

You have no idea what you're thinking.

It's too complex, spinning around in your head too too fast.

And you just wish you had enough of a coherent picture of what you saw to make something next to sense of it.

You want to vomit.

You're going to vomit.

You run to the bathroom so you *can* vomit.

"Mike?"

You look up and grimace.

"Uh, hey, Mom..."

"Why are you in here? It's a school night and you're up too late –"

"I woke up and vomited," you admit softly.

She frowns.

“But I thought you were over all that psychic-illness since October –“

“I have been, yeah.”

She rushes out of the room and you follow her hurriedly.

“Mom –“

“I’m calling Doctor Owens *right now* –“

“Mom, no, it’s two in the morning...”

“And if you’re vomiting again, that’s an emergency,” she snaps back, hanging onto the phone and looking annoyed. Naturally, he doesn’t pick up; you watch her in amusement as she leaves a rushed voicemail, just trying to relax and get your body to stop panicking.

“Do you know why you woke up and vomited?” your mom asks tiredly, looking at you and crossing her arms in front of her chest.

“Uh... I had a nightmare,” you admit softly.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Not... not really...”

“Nothing at all?”

“It’s all a big blur, mom. I can’t make much out.”

She sighs heavily.

You hear Holly shout for her from the other room.

“Well, try to get some more sleep before school tomorrow.”

“Yeah, Mom,” you agree softly, hoping that you won’t have any more dreams that night.

But then you wake up again.

Bathed in sweat.

Panting more.

Unable to really discern anything again.

You just lean in your bed, panting more.

You don't feel nauseous.

But you do feel entirely awful otherwise.

You close your eyes and you try to focus.

And in your mind, you find Jane, sleeping in her room.

You blush furiously – you really didn't mean to do this, but you need to talk to her.

So you walk over to her and kneel by her bed, murmuring, “Jane?”

She doesn't move, so you murmur her name again, “Jane?”

She stirs, now, getting up groggily and looking at you in shock.

“Mike? What's wrong? Mike?” she gasps out, stumbling to her feet and running to you.

“I had a nightmare. I can't... I can't piece it together,” you whisper, “I'm sorry I woke you.”

“It's okay,” she murmurs, kissing you on her tippy-toes, “It's okay.”

“I just... this isn't the first time. I've been having them more and more. But when I wake up everything is a blur and I don't... I don't know what happened...”

“Do you need my help?” Jane asks softly, reaching up to touch you on your face, “I can try to help...”

“I'm not sure you can,” you murmur, “It's not like you're in my mind...”

She rolls her eyes at you.

“Do you... *want* to?” you squeak.

You’ve been in her mind.

She’s not been in yours.

“Only if you’re alright with it,” Jane murmurs, “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable...”

“I... uh... can I ask you an inappropriately timed question?”

Jane frowns.

“Sure...?”

“Was it okay? That I kept going into your mind? Back in September? You were having a breakdown over being violated and I just... went inside your head... that’s basically the same thing... I guess...” you squeak out.

You’d been worrying about that for a while.

“Mike, I *took you in my head* myself,” Jane snorts.

“I... know, but –“

“It’s alright, then,” Jane pauses, “I’m not saying you can just... walk in whenever you want...”

You laugh a little.

“But, then? In that moment? I needed help, so I pulled you in. It’s fine,” Jane reassures, kissing you again, “It’s *fine*. I promise.”

You nod another time.

“Is it okay, then? For me to come into your brain and help you?” Jane asks softly.

“I guess?” you frown, “I’m just not sure how much it’ll be able to help.”

“Do you remember anything?”

“Flashes...”

“Maybe I can understand them better.”

“Alright...”

She walks over to you and takes your hands, and you hold onto hers tightly, closing your eyes and trying to let her into your mind.

For a minute, you just feel really stupid.

But in the next, you are just there – you just *exist* – but you see Jane behind your eyelids.

It’s like she’s been incorporated into you – like she’s a part of you – more than in just the obvious sense –

You’re almost overwhelmed by it.

Almost.

It helps that it’s Jane.

Uh....

You think this, you don’t even have to actively do so. You know she knows all of your thoughts.

All of them.

You kind of want to melt into the floor but you can’t because she’s just *in your mind*.

“Thank about the flashes,” Jane murmurs.

You think about the flashes.

But they’re starting to ebb away.

“Wait!” Jane shouts, “Wait, pause –“

I can’t...

“Mike –“

I *can't*, Jane!

You can't stop your mind from swirling around. It isn't a spiral. It's just cacaophany.

“Okay, okay, okay – uh – okay –“ Jane is moving around your mind, just trying to find some sort thing to hold on to.

You wish you could calm down enough so she could.

You take a deep breath.

You let another out.

You just keep breathing deeply.

Until you finally seem to calm.

“Got it – finally – “

You swallow heavily as you are keenly aware that Jane is looking at something that is in your mind, but that you aren't looking at. And she might even see it better than you.

It makes you gulp.

“It's okay, Mike,” Jane whispers. You see her behind your eyelids, smiling at you reassuringly.

You shiver a little bit.

One minute, everything seems to stop –

And then you're back in the Void.

You're just yourself, walking through the water back to Jane, who is frowning.

“What did you see?” you ask, hoping she'd know what you meant, and not... other things... that she might have seen in your mind.

“Not much,” Jane admits, “Just... snow? Lots and lots of snow.”

“Okay... why would I get freaked out by *that*?”

“Thing is,” Jane frowns, “I didn’t see anything besides snow.”

You stare at her worriedly, and she stares back.

What is coming?

M A R C H 6 1 9 8 7

“Alright *Dustin*,” Lucas says defensively, everyone sitting on the steps to the school during lunch, enjoying an unseasonably warm day.

“Dare I ask what this is about?”

“I am here with a challenge for you.”

“Oh please, God, no –“

“It has nothing to do with your secret crush.”

“Thank you, Jesus. Thank you.”

“I demand – nay, I believe your membership in the *party* is at stake lest you fulfill this request –“

“This... had better be good,” Max says, holding her face in her hands.

“That, if you are *so convinced* your version of events is *correct* –“

“Please don’t be going where I think you’re going with this –“

“I *demand* that you write a *sequel* to the Star Wars trilogy!”

Dustin stands up, his eye meeting Lucas’, the two of them staring each other down.

Jane gives you a look of amusement and you snicker quietly.

“A sequel, you say?”

“A sequel.”

The two of them circle around each other, frowning more as they seem to size each other up. Will is laughing so hard he’s on the floor, holding himself in, and Max is just shaking her head silently.

“Alright,” Dustin says, nodding, “I will write a sequel.”

“Hooray!” you cheer.

“On one condition.”

“What is *that*?”

“You do *not* yell at me for the decisions I make.”

“Oh come on –“

“Let me have my creativity! I can’t work under these conditions – judgment, anger, what have you – no – you have to trust *me*, the *author*!”

“But what if I disagree with you?”

“You can disagree with me *without yelling*?”

“Fine,” Lucas holds out his hand, “Deal?”

Dustin takes it and shakes it, “Deal.”

“Will the wonders never cease,” Max jokes.

“This is important business, Maxine –“

“*Why* must you call me that –“

“Because this is important business!”

“This is circular logic –“

“No it’s not!”

“Yes it is!”

You look at Jane and she giggles back at you, the two of you laughing quietly together.

“Okay can I make one request?” Max asks.

“Oh no –“

“*Please*, for the sake of my own sanity, just write a chapter, like, twice a week, or something? It was almost impossible to keep up with all those chapters last year and, frankly, we have more homework now,” Max says.

“Fine,” Dustin sighs, “Only because, as you say, we have more homework, and I don’t really feel like trying to write that much every day *and* maintain halfway decent grades.”

“Sanity prevails,” Max rolls her eyes.

“Are we allowed to offer constructive criticism on your writing?” Jane asks seriously. You burst out laughing.

“Wait – what –“

“I’m just saying, I’ve noticed some... grammatical... weirdness,” Jane waves her hands around dismissively.

“*You have dyslexia* –“

“Right, which means it’s kind of shocking when *I* notice issues.”

Lucas, Max, and you all roar with laughter.

“I didn’t notice anything, man.”

“*Thank* you, Will,” Dustin glares.

“It’s good writing, you just might need to polish up your style!”

“This is *the* worst day of my life –“

“Have you considered auditioning for the yearly school play?” Lucas asks.

“What *are* you talking about?”

“Dustin, you put people to shame with your sheer... stage presence,” you snort.

“That’s it, I’m going to go find new friends –“

“Good luck with that,” Max snorts.

“Is that a challenge, Mayfield?”

“It is indeed, Henderson.”

“Alright. I bet you that I can make more new friends than you by the end of the month.”

“Oh my God, I did *not* say I’d try to beat you –“

“Yeah, well, then, it’s no fun, isn’t it?”

Max and Dustin glare each other down as Jane giggles uncontrollably next to you. You can’t stop rolling your eyes at them.

“Fine. By the end of March.”

They shake on it, Lucas snorting next to them.

“Dustin, you’re going to try to make new friends *and* write a new story this month?”

“Yup.”

“Are you *aware* that Science Olympiad Regionals are this month?”

Dustin frowns.

“Challenge accepted.”

“Oh my God,” Will mutters under his breath in amusement.

“Something about this feels like we’re watching the moment in which Dustin sealed his death,” you snort.

“Mike, why do you talk like that?” Lucas groans.

“Talk like *what*?”

“Like you’re constantly in the middle of a DnD campaign –“

The bell rings behind you before you can respond, but you just glare at Lucas and he claps you on the shoulder, the two of you laughing together as you head off to class.

MARCH 21 1987

“To celebrate Max being the first of these hooligans to be free from their grounding –“

“Okay, let’s be real,” you roll your eyes, “We’re all... not really being *that* much grounded anymore. Dustin and Lucas can hang out on the weekends, now.”

“Right, but now Max is free from weekday grounding, too,” Wiconi snorts, “At any rate –“

“To celebrate one of you hooligans being free,” Steve rolls his eyes, “We are all here, the party, to hang out, even though this house is too small for it.”

“Look, Karen’s house is even smaller,” Mrs. Byers sighs behind you all, “This is the best option –“

“That’s... pretty sad,” Renee snorts.

“Could you not be snarky for *five seconds*,” Wiconi groans.

“You’re one to talk!”

“Okay, but we’re also here for another reason,” Hopper glares, “We’re here to talk about Mike’s visions.”

You groan quietly and Jane wraps her arm tightly around your shoulder.

“That’s not the only reason, Hop,” your mom mutters.

"No, it's not," Hopper agrees, "But we should get it out of the way."

You sigh heavily.

"So... you've been having nightmares?"

"Not every night," you admit, "But... more often than not."

Jane squeezes you tighter.

It is so amazing to you how strong she's gotten.

"What have you seen in them?" Renee asks seriously.

"Uh... snow. A lot of snow. And darkness. And cold," you mumble, "But... I don't see it very clearly. It's very blurry for me."

"We really only know 'cause I've gone in and... fished for it," Jane agrees softly.

Hopper nods, pacing.

"Is this like... soon? Or far off?" Wiconi asks.

"I have no idea. I just see cold. For all I know, it's a vision of next winter," you grumble.

Renee leans on her hands, "Do you... frequently... get dreams of random events in the future?"

"Well... I *did*... back when the bacteria were getting settled," you explain, "But... not really since early October, no."

"That's a half a year ago," Renee says, "Well, about. So... why would you have a dream of a normal winter day?"

"I wouldn't, probably," you admit.

"So... then what is it?" Mrs. Byers asks, her voice slightly panicked.

"You say this monster... Mind Flayer... whatever you call it... soaks up energy?" Renee asks, pacing around the room.

“Uh... it’s just a guess,” Jane mumbles.

“Still, a decent guess,” Renee pauses, pacing the room, “Will? What do you think?”

“When I was down there... it was like...” Will’s eyes look like they’re far away, “It was like everything was being drained out of me...”

“Right. So a good guess,” Renee states, “So. Cold. Dark. Snow.”

“Yeah...” you frown.

“It’s possible you’re seeing what would happen were the Mind Flayer able to get into our world in any sort of extensive capacity,” Renee finishes.

Everyone is silent. The tension is palpable.

“So what do we do?” Lucas asks.

“We try to make sure that the Gate doesn’t open back up,” Mpilo says cheerfully, “Seems easy enough! Just have to keep Jane nice and safe.”

Jane snorts softly.

“Easier said than done when mental illness is a part of it, kid,” Hopper mutters.

“Jane’s more in control of her powers now,” Wiconi says, “She’s stronger, but she’s more in control. We’ll be able to help her. Keep it all together.”

Jane nods, looking braver. You lean over and kiss her on the cheek.

“Well then, we just have to keep Jane safe,” Renee says firmly, “It’s not like the things Mike sees in the future are particularly set in stone.”

“No...” you frown, and everyone starts talking more among themselves, you watching everyone in quiet worry.

MARCH 31 1987

"Alright, it's time to tally up," Lucas announces to everyone after school, sitting on the hood of Dustin's car and grinning, "It is time, my friends. It is time."

Dustin grumbles next to Max, who grins triumphantly. Lucas holds up two sheets of paper in his hands and reads off from them.

"The friend tally for Max comes in at... five," Lucas shouts out, holding the paper, "And the friend tally for Dustin comes in at..."

His eyes widen.

"Fifteen..."

"Wait, *what?*" Max shouts.

"You're *kidding!* I *THOUGHT THAT WAS LOW!*" Dustin shouts eagerly.

"Apparently not," Lucas frowns.

"This has truly been thrilling to witness," you say sarcastically, Jane laughing next to you.

"Watching you both awkwardly approaching random people in the hallways and begging them to say they're your friend for the sake of a bet has, indeed, been enlightening," Lucas rolls his eyes, "But it is clear that the winner here is Dustin."

"This isn't fair! He's nicer than I am!" Max shouts.

"Exactly," Dustin sticks his tongue out at you.

"*You challenged me!*"

"I did! Because you were getting all up into my face about my writing!"

"We all have room to grow!"

"Ha!"

“Ha?”

“Says the person who refused to even *try* to be cheerful and friendly in order to win a *month long bet!*”

“Oh come on –“

Lucas claps her on the shoulder and kisses her forehead, and she winces.

Everyone looks at Max in worry.

“Max... what’s wrong?” Will asks softly.

“Nothing,” Max mutters, “C’mon. Let’s... it’s time for the grounded to go home...”

“Max...” Lucas whispers, “Did...”

“Yeah. It’s okay though.”

Everyone looks at each other as Max goes to her car.

“How bad is it?” Jane murmurs.

Max shrugs, but winces when she does so.

Her face is completely screwed up in pain, and she looks at you all for a minute before she takes off her sweatshirt, revealing a large series of purple and blue bruises up and down her arms and shoulders.

“Holy shit,” Dustin whispers.

Lucas looks utterly horrified.

Well, you all do.

But him the most.

“It’s nothing,” Max mumbles.

“It’s... definitely not nothing,” you murmur.

"Look, I don't want to *talk* about it, alright?" Max demands, "I don't... I don't want to deal with this right now..."

She gets in her car and slams the door, waving on Lucas to get in the car. You walk over with Dustin to his, the two of you frowning at each other in worry.

"What do we do?" Dustin murmurs quietly as you pull out of the parking lot, driving slowly as you stare out the window.

"I really don't know. This is... a bit different... than the other things we've had to deal with."

"A *bit*?"

"Okay, yeah. A lot different."

"Like, it's a real-world problem, so it isn't just some supernatural thing we tackle head on. It's a problem with a figure of authority, so it's not us just being stupid about telling family that it's a problem..."

"Yeah..."

"And I don't want to put her in more danger," Dustin mutters, "And we have a high likelihood of putting her in more danger."

"You know who we should talk to about this?" you say seriously.

"Who...?"

"One of the adults."

"You wanna talk to *Hop* about this –"

"No, not Hop," you snort, "But... someone..."

"Yeah," Dustin sighs, "Yeah."

"At what point do we do that?"

"I dunno. When you were suicidal... we all waited too long."

You frown, staring out the window.

“Yeah... I guess you did.”

“Sorry...”

“No, it’s a valid thing to bring up.”

“No... I mean... sorry. Sorry that we let you down.”

You look over at Dustin with a frown.

“You didn’t let me down, man...”

“No, we definitely did,” Dustin shrugs, “We failed to help a party member in time. If Jane hadn’t had... a spidey sense worry about you –“

“More like an anxiety worry –“

“Whatever... if she hadn’t had that... you wouldn’t be here right now.”

You look over at Dustin.

He’s clearly crying as you pull up to your house.

“Dustin...”

“Look, man, now’s not the time –“

“I’m sorry too.”

The two of you look at each other.

“You don’t have to be –“

“Yeah, I do. I was selfish. And I hurt you all,” you sigh, “So I’m sorry.”

You reach out your hand to shake his, and he shakes his head.

“No, man –“

“Yes –“

“You didn’t draw first blood, regardless –“

You look at each other for another moment, before you give each other a large hug, squeezing tightly before you open the door to go back into your house.

“We’ll figure out something for Max,” you say, looking back at Dustin.

He lets out a huge sigh.

“Yeah. Yeah we will.”

He smiles weakly at you, and you smile weakly back, before you go back into your house.

A P R I L 1 1 1 9 8 7

“Your party is walking through the woods, only silhouetted by the light of the moon,” you say, reading your book and going through your plotted campaign. Lucas and Will and Dustin and Jane and Max are all looking at you eagerly, their own guides in front of them.

“A soft, ethereal scream can be heard out in the distance, unnerving all of your party members!”

“We keep walking,” Lucas says firmly, nodding at everyone, who nod back at him.

“As you keep walking, the woods just get denser – and denser – and denser –“

You lower your voice as soft as it’ll go, looking at everyone and grinning. Everyone leans across the table, watching you eagerly as you talk.

“When... all of a sudden... you see... *The Vampire!*”

“Oh *shit!*” Max shouts.

“Fuck fuck fuck –“ Lucas rambles.

“What do we do? What do we *do*?” Dustin begs.

“The vampire fixes his gaze on each of you, and a wave of terror washes of you! Make a saving throw!” you shout.

“Fuck!” Will groans.

“I’ll go first,” Lucas says, and he starts wiggling his dice.

“You need a fifteen or higher –“

“Yeah, yeah, I know!”

The dice land on the table.

“Phew,” Lucas whispers, “A twenty.”

“You are safe, and not unnerved by the vampire!” you shout.

Max rolls her dice without comment.

“Oh thank God,” Max groans, “Fifteen exactly.”

Jane follows next.

“Uh-oh,” she whispers, “Fifteen...”

“And with your Minus One Charisma...” Dustin groans.

“Fourteen,” Jane murmurs, “I’m useless...”

“It’s okay, we still have Will –“

Dustin rolls.

“Fuck, I got a twelve –“

“But you have plus four charisma! You’re saved!” Lucas cheers.

“Phew!”

Will rolls.

“Oh... no...” Will whispers.

“Three,” you murmur sadly.

“Not enough charisma in the world to make up for that,” Lucas groans.

“Your cleric and your mage are paralyzed with fear!” you shout, “What do you do?”

“We’re fucked,” Lucas grumbles.

“We have to try anyway,” Dustin insists.

They roll, and they try to fight against the Vampire, but without the other two players, they’re unable to fight off the vampire’s minions, and they’re picked off –

“One, by, one,” you murmur, grinning at everyone.

“We’re all *dead*?” Will shouts.

“Just like *that*?” Jane groans.

“We’ve been working on these characters for *ages*!” Max protests.

“That’s just the way it goes,” you shrug.

“Fuck. If just *one* of them had been okay...” Will mutters.

Lucas looks up suddenly.

“It was... because of both of them...”

Dustin looks up.

“Both of them...”

They look at each other for a long moment.

“Shit,” they say in unison.

“What... is going on?” Will asks.

Dustin gets up and starts pacing the room, holding his hands tightly in his hair.

“Shit shit shit shit shit shit –“

“Maybe we can –“

“No, we’re fucked. You realize it as well as I,” Dustin snaps.

“Would *someone* just tell me what’s going on?” Jane screams, looking furious.

“Okay, don’t break any windows,” Lucas begs.

Jane just glares more.

You glare with her.

You don’t even want to *know* what your powers will do when you’re angry.

“You know how we thought we just have to keep Jane... okay... so she doesn’t open the gate?” Dustin asks seriously.

“Yeah?” you, Jane, Max, and Will say in unison.

“What if... it’s more complicated than that?” Lucas continues, still holding his die in his hands.

“More complicated *how*?” you demand.

“Dimensions are made up of two things. Space and time,” Dustin says, running back over to you all.

“Jane opened the original gate when she hadn’t... transferred... one aspect of her powers over to Mike,” Lucas continues, rolling his die nervously in between his fingers.

“And the Mind Flayer knows now – knows *very well* – that the best way to make one of you completely *lose it* –“

“Is to hurt the other one –“

“Creating an endless loop –“

“With you both basically feeding into each other just breaking down –“

“Until you both simultaneously just –“

“Lose it –“

“And break open a door in the universe.”

Everyone looks at each other in shock.

“So it’s not just me?” Jane whispers.

“Now that your time powers are Mike’s, no, it’s not just you,” Lucas says.

“It’s worse than that. You’d think that having both of you be needed would be a barrier for the Mind Flayer,” Dustin pauses, “But the fact that you two tend to... lean on each other... too much...”

“Means that the Mind Flayer can use you both to bring you *both* down in one fell swoop,” Lucas finishes.

You look over at Jane and she looks at you, both of you swallowing in terror.

“So what do we do?” Max asks seriously, her face twisted in panic.

Lucas slams down his die on the table.

“We prepare.”

Dustin looks at you and Jane seriously.

“And we keep you two *mentally well*.”

He looks over at Lucas, and Lucas looks over at him.

“Whatever it takes.”

All six of you come together and hug, and you can’t help but panic a

little.

Shit.

Just.

Shit.

A P R I L 1 6 1 9 8 7

"I miss bread," you say woefully, staring out ahead of you as you make your way inside of school next to Jane.

"I'm sorry Mike," Jane says, smiling at you, "But hey, at least the seder meals are over?"

You roll your eyes, "I don't *mind* the seder meals..."

"I know, but they're long," Jane sticks out her tongue.

"You haven't minded going, have you?" you ask worriedly.

"No, not at all," Jane murmurs, "I like it a lot. But it is long."

You laugh.

"Yeah, yeah it is."

You go over to her locker and she grabs things out of it, looking up and smiling at you widely.

"How goes your religious journey with Hop?" you ask seriously.

"Well, I've learned some things about Catholicism, the different Protestant-isms, Islam, and Buddhism," Jane pauses, "And obviously a lot about Judaism."

You grin at her.

"It's just hard because apart from Judaism and Christian things there aren't really... religious communities here in Hawkins," she frowns, "So I don't really get to experience much. I'm fairly certain I don't like Christianity, though."

You snort.

“I mean, who *does*?”

“Lots of people, Mike, that’s why it’s such a common belief system,” Jane rolls her eyes.

“What else would you want to try, that you can’t?”

“Buddhism,” she answers honestly, “And possibly Wicca. I just started reading about that.”

“You don’t think you’ll go with nothing?”

“Honestly, that would be the fourth thing. But... I’ve seen too much weird shit to completely believe that nothing else exists out there.”

You snort.

“Agreed.”

She grins at you and leans up to kiss you softly, making your heart leap.

You love to kiss her.

You love her so much.

“I am still considering Judaism,” she murmurs, pulling back from you, “It’s just... *so hard* to tell if the reason I like it so much is you, or because of what it is.”

“Yeah, I get that,” you pause, “Uh...”

“What?”

“If I could add a practical consideration?”

“Of course.”

“If... we were to ever... have... um...”

You stammer over your words, blushing furiously as she looks up at

you curiously.

“What?”

“Um... I know we haven’t... talked about this... since September...”

She tilts her head to the side.

“Mike...”

You let out a long breath.

“If we decided we wanted kids. It would be easier. To raise them. If we believed in the same stuff,” you pause, “That’s all.”

She nods, looking down at her shoes.

“I’ve thought of that.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, Mike, it’s okay,” she swallows, “I... just...”

“What?”

“I don’t know if I want kids.”

“I figured.”

You look at each other for a long minute.

“Is that okay?”

“I want what you want.”

“Mike –“

“Okay, that’s not always true. But... ya know... kids are a thing we would do together,” you frown, “So we have to both agree with it. I don’t even know if *I* want them. But, ya know, if you don’t, then we won’t. Also, we’re still too young to think about this.”

“Exactly,” Jane murmurs, “And I’m not sure that I *don’t* want them.

I'm not."

You nod.

"Let's... worry about that when we're like. Out of college."

She giggles.

"Out of college. Yes."

You walk together to your locker, hands linked together and squeezing. She rests her head on your shoulder and you kiss the top of her head, feeling her soft curls beneath your lips and sighing happily.

"If you want... me to explain... why I like Judaism... for me..."

Jane looks up at you as you pull books out slowly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm not positive I'll be able to explain everything *well*, but I think I can explain it. And... I want to help. If I can."

Jane beams widely at you.

"I would love that, Mike."

You lean in and kiss her, and you both hold to each other tightly, smiling into the kiss as you do so.

"I love you, Jane," you whisper softly.

"I love you, Mike," she murmurs back, looking up at you and beaming.

"Hey now, no shmoopy business in the halls."

You both turn around and glare at Lucas, who's grinning at you. He hands you a stack of flyers, nodding seriously.

"Can you help hand these out around school?"

You look down at one of them, Jane peering around your arm.

WANT TO DEFEND YOURSELF AGAINST THE WEIRD THINGS WE
SEE IN THIS TOWN?

WANT TO JUST LEARN TO DEFEND YOURSELF IN GENERAL?

COME LEARN SELF DEFENSE!

SATURDAYS FROM THREE TO SIX IN PHILLIPS PARK

LEARN FROM LUCAS SINCLAIR AND MAX MAYFIELD
THEMSELVES!

You frown at Lucas.

“Weird things in this town?”

“Let’s be real, people have noticed the smoke crap and the stuff with Will and the people disappearing and the stuff with the Department of Energy,” Lucas pauses, “There are people out there who are... nervous.”

“Yeah, like, two years ago,” you frown, “Now things have been... quiet...”

“That huge mysterious car crash was *less than a year ago*,” Lucas insists, “And I dunno about you guys, but I don’t really feel like having to face off against the Mind Flayer with only our party ready to do it.”

You sigh heavily.

“No one’s going to want to do this,” Jane murmurs.

“Oh ye of little faith –“

“That is one of my problems,” Jane frowns.

You snort loudly.

“You are both *no* help at all,” Lucas mutters, grabbing the papers back from you and walking off in a loud huff.

Jane kisses you on the cheek, and walks away to her next class.

A P R I L 24 1987

“Pass the challah,” you say happily, reaching over for some bread as you all sit around the table, talking and laughing and in general having a nice day. You’re glad you can eat bread again, frankly, and you’re also just glad to have your family and Jane and Will and Mrs. Byers and Hopper over.

It’s a nice way to spend Shabbat evening.

“Don’t eat it *all*, Mike –“

“I will eat as much as I want, Bubbe,” you grin.

Bubbe just smirks.

“You do need more food. You look much too skinny.”

“*Bubbe* –“

“I just want you to grow up big and strong, zeisele –“

“There is only so much challah, though,” Jane points out, grinning a little bit.

“There’s other food!” Zayde cheers, “Come Janey, have some gefilte fish –“

“OH... uh... no...”

You burst out laughing and she giggles with you. Holly laughs, too, sticking out her tongue.

“I hate gefilte fish!”

“Yes, Holly, I’m aware,” Mom says, rolling her eyes.

“It’s gross!”

“You’ve mentioned it.”

Will and you giggle together loudly.

“So, we have an... announcement,” Mrs. Byers says, looking around the table and smiling.

“We?” you ask.

“Announcement?” Jane asks, frowning.

“Well... we all know something is coming. Because of Mike’s visions,” Mrs. Byers pauses, “And... well... we’ve been... kind of tip toeing... around this in general...”

Everyone watches her in confusion.

She and Hopper hold each other’s hands, looking at each other and smiling for a minute, before looking back out at the table.

“We’re going to get married,” Hopper says, smiling through his thick beard, “In August.”

Everyone watches in shock.

“Really?” Jane breathes.

“We’re going to be siblings for *real*?” Will asks, grinning.

“Yup. For real,” Hopper nods.

“We just figured... I’ve been like a new mom for you, Jane, for a while... and Hopper’s been like a new Dad for you, Will...”

“Yeah!” Will cheers.

“That’s great, Joyce,” Karen says, smiling and nodding.

Jane is frowning.

“Is this okay, Jane?” Hopper asks softly.

“Yeah,” she murmurs, “I’m happy for you.”

“There’s clearly something wrong, though, zeisele,” Bubbe says,

reaching across the table and holding Jane's hand.

Jane sighs.

"I... uh... don't... want to replace Mama."

Everyone looks down at their plates sadly.

"I'm not replacing your Mom, Jane. I'm not," Mrs. Byers says softly, "You can have more than one mom. And if you don't want to call me Mom, that's okay too."

Jane nods, smiling a little more now.

"Okay. Then I'm completely happy."

Mrs. Byers and Hopper both breathe with relief.

"I have to say it's about damn time," Zayde says.

"Oh geez –"

"You two have been in love since high school but you both made huge mistakes. The only good thing to come of them is that we have Will and Jonathan and Hopper was in the right place to take in Janey," Zayde fishes.

Hopper just groans.

You laugh.

"A wedding," Jane murmurs softly, "I've never been to one."

"Well, hopefully you have fun," Mrs. Byers says reassuringly.

Jane smiles.

"I hope so."

You look at her and grin, and she grins back at you.

You can't help but blush when you think about Jane and weddings.

A P R I L 27 1987

There is a big test in History the next day, so Jane isn't having a birthday party.

But she is sixteen.

So you go over to her house, as your mom and Mrs. Byers and Hopper all talk wedding plans together, and study in her room.

"I hate that I'm having a test the day after my birthday," Jane mutters.

"But just think!" you say, "You'll have your big party this weekend."

"Yeah," Jane sighs, "Yeah. Just gotta get to the weekend."

You kiss her on the cheek and smile at her, reaching up to gently touch her hair.

"I'm happy you were born."

She grins.

"I'm happy *you* were born."

You both giggle.

"I... uh... I got you a present," you murmur softly.

"Okay?"

You reach into your pocket and pull out the small wrapped object. Jane takes it and opens it eagerly, ripping off the paper like a child during the Holidays.

"Oh... it's a box?" she asks in confusion.

"Just open it," you say.

She nods and opens it, pulling out a long necklace.

At the end of it is a small heart, with two letters written into it.

J

And

M

Jane looks up at you, smiling.

“Mike...”

“I just... I know that it’s kind of like the locket,” you pause, “But... I just wanted to give you something to have. And to wear. That would remind you of me. Like the locket reminds me of you.”

You hold onto it underneath your shirt at the thought.

“I just... I like having something like this. Close to me. It... reminds me... how lucky I am.”

She puts it on eagerly, tackling you suddenly – having been lying on her bed as you sat on the floor next to it – and kissing you all over your face.

“Jane!” you shout in shock.

“I love it, Mike, thank you-“

“You’re welcome!”

You both look at each other and giggle uncontrollably, you kissing her deeply and making her sigh softly.

“Happy birthday,” you murmur.

“Thank you, Mike,” Jane says, kissing you again. You wrap your arms tightly around her, and you both keep kissing for a long time, forgetting about history just for a moment, unable to stop yourselves

–

“We don’t hear STUDYING in there!”

You leap apart from each other, both squeaking in shock, before giggling loudly.

“STUDY!”

She hands you your book, and you ask her questions about it, just smiling as you look at each other.

What could possibly make you break down enough to open that Gate?

Notes for the Chapter:

HUGE SHOUT OUT TO MY FRIEND MAYA JADE FOR HELPING ME TO WRITE THE DND SCENE I don't play DnD I have no idea how it works

Thank!! you all!!! for your comments!!! They're always so lovely :D

I'm sorry this chapter took a while. Truth be told, A) star wars came out this weekend (I have mixed feelings) and B) my depression was... bad. Very very bad. It's still very very bad. I'm not doing great rn. I'd appreciate more comments to help :)

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and please tell me what you think!!! I'll be sure to respond to all your lovely comments soon :)

36. Nosebleeds

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for mentions of racism & physical abuse

M A Y 3 1 9 8 7

J A N E H O P P E R

You're not the hugest fan of blood.

It's not exactly like you're afraid of it. That would be a major problem for you in your life, if you were *afraid* of blood.

But you have so many memories tied into blood –

So many *bad* memories –

Being forced to use your powers

People dying around you and in the Upside-Down

The complete destruction of the people in the Lab

Mike on the floor of his room

Mike getting nosebleeds

Your first period

The car crash

Everything

Just

A mess

But

You're not the hugest fan of blood

So when you wake up and see Will wiping blood from his nose, you can't help but panic.

"Will? What's wrong?" you ask, running forward to him and grabbing his arm.

"What – this? Nothing," Will frowns.

"Nosebleeds *aren't nothing* –"

"Look, we've talked to Doctor Owens endlessly about this. There's no way the rest of us can get powers just from living with you. It needs a more intimate type of bacterial exchange," Will rolls his eyes, "And no offense but I don't feel like kissing you."

You snort despite yourself.

"Okay, but – nosebleeds – are never –"

"I know, Jane, but sometimes a nosebleed is just a nosebleed."

You nod at him, watching him run back up into his room, but you just wish you hadn't seen that weird look behind his eyes.

So you sprint over to where Dad is pouring over books at the kitchen table, muttering to himself and writing down things from them.

"This one – yeah – with her grades – perfect –"

"Dad?"

He jumps a little in his seat, looking up and at you in shock.

"Jane – what –"

"It's very cold, for May..."

Dad frowns at you.

"Yes, it is?"

You swallow.

“Uh, is it dry, too?”

“Yes...?”

“Would that cause nosebleeds?”

Dad slowly stands up, approaching you and frowning.

“Did someone get a nosebleed?”

“Will...”

Dad looks over in the direction of Will’s room, and then back at you.

“It is cold. And dry. So yeah, nosebleeds are... normal,” Dad frowns.

“You sure?”

He nods, but he still looks troubled.

“Normal...”

“What’s this?” you ask, looking down at the books he was looking at. Before you can piece together the words of the covers, Dad piles all the books together and hides them away.

“Nothing, nothing –“

“Dad.”

He looks at you, frowning.

“Dads don’t lie.”

He sighs.

“It’s... scholarship stuff. For you. For college,” he explains, pulling out the books, “I’m looking for things that you could possibly get.”

“Oh,” you frown, looking at the large books, “Is... money a problem?”

“Well, it’ll help if you got one of these,” he pauses, “But I’m going to help you go wherever you want to go. If you want to go to college, I mean.”

You smile a little bit.

“Thank you.”

He kisses the top of your head.

“You’re welcome, kiddo.”

You snort, and walk back over to your room to practice your guitar with the birds singing along, thoughts of Will’s nosebleed wiped from your mind.

M A Y 1 5 1 9 8 7

“I have determined,” Max says angrily, slamming her books down at the kitchen table of your house, everyone over after school –

The parents eventually decided that everyone was punished enough –

“That AP exams are the worst things concocted by mankind.”

“Agreed,” Will groans, looking exhausted.

“AP US History was that fun, huh?” Dustin asks, grimacing apologetically.

“Yup,” Max mutters.

“Please tell me you’ve written more of your story,” Will begs, “I need to think about something mindless.”

“You know, I’m *insulted* by that,” Dustin mutters.

“I’m not saying it isn’t *good*, just that it doesn’t make my *soul cry* like that stupid test did –“

“I’d take the complement, man,” Lucas snorts.

Dustin rolls his eyes, but hands Will the stack of papers.

“At least you guys have one less final to worry about –“

“I *guess*, but at *what cost*,” Max mutters.

“This’ll be fun next year,” you say, frowning.

“We’ll be fine! We’re gonna be the BC Calc bros!” Dustin cheers.

“Uh... I’m taking AB,” Lucas says, frowning.

“*What?!*” you and Dustin shout in unison.

“Look, it’s easier, and I can take BC Calc senior year –“

“Traitor!” you shout.

“I am *not a traitor* –“

“You’re abandoning me and Jane to our more difficult math fate!”
Dustin shouts.

Lucas just groans, holding his face in his hands.

“I want to be able to focus on all my subjects –“

“Nope, I’m with Dustin. You’re a traitor,” you say, nodding.

“You’re *smarter* than me and Jane and *yet* –“ Dustin butts in.

“Yes, I’m smarter, so I’m *intelligently* taking calculus one step at a time because we have *time to do so!*”

“Bah. You are just backing away from a challenge!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“*Speaking* of R2, I am very worried about him!” Will reminds.

“Yes, yes, I’ll write, I’ll write –“

“Don’t’ forget that we have to study for our Spanish final,” you sigh.

“You can do it,” Mike murmurs.

“I hope so...”

“We’ll start studying tonight, okay?” Mike promises, “And I’ll give you a kiss every time you get something right!”

“I was *going* to offer to come and help, but now I will... not be doing that,” Dustin says, grimacing.

“I mean, you still can,” you laugh.

“I’d... really rather not.”

“Aww, still lovelorn?” Lucas teases.

Dustin sighs.

“Yeah.”

“Oh wow, this sounds serious,” Lucas pauses, “Do you like... need help, man?”

“No,” Dustin grumbles, “I dunno. Maybe.”

“Is it really impossible? For you to be with her?” Will asks softly.

Dustin sighs again, “Yeah. It is.”

“Why?” you ask curiously.

Dustin frowns, “I dunno if I want to say. I don’t want you guys to know who she is.”

“My curiosity will never be satisfied about this,” Mike groans.

“Well then, you’ll just have to suffer.”

“Thanks, pal!”

“Anytime buddy.”

“Can you give us... a rough *idea* of why?” you ask.

Dustin glares at you, sighing heavily.

“Because... we’re at different places in our lives. We just wouldn’t work out.”

“That sucks, man,” Mike says.

“Yeah. It does.”

“Do you... talk to her? At all? Like, can you be friends?” Will offers.

“Friends is great, too,” Max agrees.

“Uh... Kind of? Not frequently though,” Dustin explains.

“Well you should try to talk to her more! Just be friends,” Lucas says, smiling.

Dustin frowns and nods,

“Yeah. Maybe I will.”

“And, in the meantime, you can write about angsty, pining love in your story!” Will cheers.

“Oh my God –“

“I want one thing, man. Just the one thing.”

“Fine! I’ll try to write some soon!”

“Hooray!”

M A Y 25 1987

“You know what’s weird?” Mike asks as you sit together under a tree, him lightly playing with your hair as you try to study, enjoying the slightly warmer air.

It had been too cold lately and it made you nervous.

“What?” you ask, reaching out for his hand and playing with his fingers, lightly moving them in between each of yours.

“I’ve been... trying... to see into the future lately. Because of my weird visions, you know? I thought I could circumvent the problem by, like... just seeking it out myself.”

“Yeah, makes sense,” you agree.

“But it’s all... blurry. It’s just hard to see,” Mike says, “Like, some details I can make out – the snow, darkness, cold – heck, I can even see closer in the future. I can see us hanging out in the summer. I can see us starting school. But the further I get... the more details I lose... and that wasn’t how it worked before. Before I could see things. They were less likely to *happen*, but I could *see* them.”

“That... is very weird,” you say, frowning.

“Yeah. And my powers still work just fine. I went back in time the other day,” Mike continues.

“Where did you go? And did you... go go, or just visit?” you ask.

“I *went* went. I went back in time to when you were in hiding. That year,” Mike looks ahead of himself, almost wistfully, “Obviously I didn’t... you know... let you know I was there. But I did watch. You were watching TV and you looked... bored. And sad.”

“Seems about right,” you agree, snorting.

“I don’t know why I went, I just... I guess... sometimes I miss when things were simpler.”

You laugh a little bit.

“Me too.”

He kisses you on the top of your head and plays with your fingers now, while you frown quietly.

“So then... why can’t you see the future?”

“I really don’t know,” Mike sighs, “I was hoping you’d have an idea.”

“None at all.”

You both look at each other worriedly.

“Let me... talk to Renee,” you offer, closing your eyes.

Void.

You walk through the water and the darkness, looking around for Renee.

You know where she *is*.

She’s at the Lab, technically getting paid as a “researcher” except she’s the research *subject*.

“Renee?” you call.

Nothing.

You frown.

“Renee?”

Nothing.

Not even her standing somewhere.

Your stomach seems to fall.

You decide to call one of the others –

Fumiko –

She should be available, right?

You find her with her mind.

But you don’t see her in the Void.

You don't see anyone in the Void.

You swallow heavily.

Perhaps it's just them in the Labs. Maybe there's a block against psychic-talk.

You look for Tarek.

He should be working, giving people tattoos.

But.

Nothing.

You know where he is.

But you can't see him.

Now you're panicking.

You flit back to the real world.

"Jane? Where'd you go?" Mike asks, reaching to your nose and wiping the blood out from underneath it.

"Um... I tried to see if I could ask Renee about you having trouble with future-sight."

"Oh? What did Renee say?"

"That's the thing," you say, frowning, "I... couldn't talk to her."

"You... what?"

"I couldn't see her. At all."

Mike's face drains of color.

"Um –"

"So then I tried to talk to Fumiko? Because maybe she was just busy or... something?"

“You should have still been able to see her –“

“I know. And I couldn’t see Fumiko either.”

“Shit,” Mike lets out in a whisper.

“So then I thought, well, maybe the Labs are... psychic proof?”

“That seems wrong.”

“It is, but I tried Tarek anyway.”

“And?”

“Nothing.”

Mike gulps.

“So something’s wrong.”

“Something is *very* wrong,” you agree softly.

You both look at each other for a long time.

“We should tell Hopper –“

“Yeah, let’s –“

“Yeah –“

You both get up and run back to the house together, sprinting down the various small streets until you reach the Byers-Hopper house, running inside to find Dad and Joyce... kissing.

“Um...” you squeak.

“Ah!” Mike shouts.

They break apart, Dad glaring a little bit.

“May... we help you?”

“Um,” Mike says.

"There's... a problem," you manage to sputter out.

"What is it?" Joyce asks, jumping up and running to you both.

"I can't really see the future very well anymore," Mike mumbles.

"And... I can't find people. In my head. Anymore," you continue.

Joyce and Dad look at each other worriedly.

"I'll call up Renee at the end of the day," Joyce says.

"And I'll talk to the Doc," Dad agrees.

"We'll figure this out," Joyce reassures, "I promise, Jane."

You nod.

Mike reaches out and squeezes your hand as tight as he can.

But you can still feel your stomach churning.

M A Y 31 1987

"There was once a time in my life," Dustin says grumpily, "When I could focus on finals without having to worry about people wanting my head."

"You killed off Han Solo!" Max screeches.

"IT HAD TO BE DONE –"

"Han Solo. Han *freaking* Solo, man," Lucas says, shaking his head.

"How are we supposed to study for our health final when our *hearts* have been *ripped out*?" Mike agrees.

"Oh my God, you guys *asked me* to make it more harrowing –"

"This isn't what we meant!"

"Well then what did you mean?!"

“Raise the stakes *without* killing our favorites –“

“Oh please! That’s so empty – so hollow! That’s barely raising the stakes! You have to... you have to *earn* it!”

“BY KILLING OFF HAN SOLO?!”

“DURING HIS AND LEIA’S WEDDING –“

“*HAN SOLO!*”

“AND IT WAS LUKE BEING CONTROLLED BY DARTH KRÜL –“

“AND LUKE IS SO UPSET *WE DON’T EVEN KNOW WHERE HE IS OR IF HE’S OKAY* –“

“AND NOW LEIA IS LEFT *ALONE. ALONE. WITH HER UNBORN CHILDREN.*”

“AND EVERYTHING IS AWFUL!”

“Okay! Okay! I get it! I was cruel!” Dustin shouts.

“*TOO CRUEL!*” you all shout in unison.

“Can we *please* study this stuff –“

“No,” you say, shaking your head, “You don’t get to just *drop* this chapter on us and expect it to be *okay* –“

“You all asked for a new chapter!!!”

“Why are you *blaming* the *victims* –“

“This is my story! You all promised you wouldn’t yell!”

“Technically, only I promised I wouldn’t yell,” Lucas points out, “The rest of these guys were bound to nothing. And I didn’t yell.”

“You scolded me!”

“You didn’t say no scolding!”

“It was implied!”

“I cannot figure out every thing that you imply with your words –“

“Well you certainly seem to think that you can based on your scoldings!”

“Oh my God,” Max groans, shaking her head back and forth.

“Okay, we really should be studying,” Mike says, laughing.

“Ugh, must we be studying health?”

“Would you rather study something else?”

“Literally anything else –“

You giggle quietly. Mike leans over and kisses you on the side of your head. You all settle into a calm, happy silence, pouring over textbooks and not talking much at all, though you like to feel Mike being so close to you, and your friends all around you.

You hear the front door open in the distance, everyone in the group looking up in surprise.

“Max? Are you here?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Max says, jumping to her feet, “What’s up?”

“We’re home – your father had a nosebleed –“

“My friends are here – is that okay?” Max asks, going out into the hallway.

“Yeah, of course sweetie. Studying for finals?”

You all look at each other in worry, Lucas angling towards the window, as though he is about to jump out from it.

“Yup – do you need anything from me?”

“No, we don’t –“

“I’ve never met these so-called friends of yours –“

“It’s alright, we’re all just studying...”

“Well let us say hi, then –”

“We don’t have to, Neil, we should get going...”

“No no, I want to say hello to all of her friends.”

“Um –“

The door opens and you all look up to see a man with a thick mustache looks around at you all, Lucas hovering by the window and looking terrified.

“Hello everyone,” he greets, not looking over at him – or really over at Mike, or at Will, even.

“Hello,” you all greet back awkwardly.

“What are you studying?” he continues, smiling, mostly at you and Dustin, and making your skin crawl.

“Uh...”

“Health,” Dustin says.

“Ah, will that be a particularly difficult exam?”

“Probably not,” Mike says quietly.

“Well then, shouldn’t you be studying for something else?”

“Um... probably, yeah...”

Everyone is looking at Neil with contempt, to say the least, and Neil is looking back at you all in confusion, as Max stands awkwardly behind him.

“Maxine?”

“Yes?”

“Follow me, just for a moment.”

You all look at each other in terror as Neil and Max go to another room. Max’s Mom stands in the doorway, looking at you all with a funny expression on her face.

“You all should probably leave,” she murmurs.

You all look at each other.

“We’re not going to,” Lucas mutters.

The screaming starts in another room. It’s hard to make out every word, but the loud noises make you flinch. Mike holds you tighter in response to that, but you all look at each other in worry.

“YOU BRING A –“

Your eyes widen at the words coming out of Neil’s mouth

“ – INTO MY HOUSE –“

“He’s my friend, Dad, leave him alone –“

“I will not –“

“DO NOT DISRESPECT ME –“

You flinch again.

Mike holds you tighter.

“We should leave,” Mike mutters.

“Max –“

“I know, but...”

“You should all go,” Max’s mom agrees.

“I don’t want to leave her,” Lucas mutters.

“I understand, but...”

A loud *thwump* rings out from that direction.

Lucas' eyes widen.

Max's mom just hangs her head.

"Please leave."

You all pack up your things, you looking around at everyone in terrified confusion, but no one really says much of anything.

You all just run out of the house while the sound of Max's crying fills your ears.

J U N E 2 1 9 8 7

You lie out on the grass, your head next to Mike's, just staring up at the night sky.

Finals are hard, and you still have a few left to go, and you both know you should be studying.

But, just for a moment, you want to rest. You want to breathe. You want to enjoy the feeling of the grass between your fingers and the cool breeze on your face and Mike's arm resting against yours.

So you lie out there, just watching the stars collect in the sky, not saying much of anything.

Not talking about your chemistry final.

Not talking about how Max couldn't hang out with you all anymore.

Not talking about how Lucas will still sneak out to see her.

Not talking about how apparently four random people from around town were admitted to the hospital with heavy nosebleeds this past week.

Not talking about anything.

Just sitting there.

“Do you want to get some ice cream?” Mike asks softly.

“It’s cold out,” you say, frowning.

“Yeah, but... I’d like some, I think.”

“Alright,” you smile. You both get up and Mike starts riding his bike, you sitting on the back of it, even though you’re both a little tall for this now, even though you’re both bigger than you used to be. You just ride through the town to the ice cream parlor, walking into it and sitting down together with a big sundae.

“I wanted to eat this today because...” Mike pauses, “It’s a holiday.”

“Another one?” you say, laughing.

“Yeah,” Mike grins, “It’s Shavuot.”

“What’s that one?”

“We eat dairy products and study Torah all night.”

“So... we’re having ice cream and studying chemistry all night?”

“Pretty much.”

You both laugh together more.

You love laughing with him.

It’s so rarely what you get to do together.

But the sound of it is music to your ears.

“What does the holiday *mean*, though?” you ask after a while.

You know all of these holidays have more than one thing behind them.

“Well,” Mike frowns, “It’s supposed to be... the commemoration of when we *got* the Torah. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai and got the whole thing from God.”

“Oh,” you say, “Make sense that’s why you’d study it then.”

“Exactly,” Mike says, nodding, “And like, there are other things to it too. It’s the day we celebrate converts and stuff.”

“Celebrate converts?”

“Yeah, cause like, the saying is that all the Jewish people – everyone that existed then, and everyone that *would* exist, were present when the Torah was delivered. So converts were there, too. So we read the Book of Ruth, which talks about this woman who converted to Judaism, and she actually ended up being the ancestor of one of our important kings and stuff because she did that. So a lot of it is about how, at one point, all Jewish people were converts. Before we got the Torah, no one was Jewish. But then we all became Jewish. So no one is... less Jewish... just cause they converted,” Mike explains.

You nod, eating the ice cream and frowning.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you tell me why you like being Jewish? You promised me you would.”

“Oh! Um...” Mike frowns, “I guess today’s a good day for it...”

“That’s why I asked.”

“Just, the Chem final –“

“We’ve studied a lot,” you point out.

“True.”

“And we both already have A’s...”

“Also true.”

“And we’re both good at science.”

“Again, true.”

“So... just for a little bit?”

“Okay,” Mike agrees, smiling, “But let’s leave and go outside again.”

You nod, smiling, and you both walk back outside, journeying together back to your house after finishing the sundae.

You reach the yard and lie back down in it again, him reaching out and holding your hand, squeezing it and making your heart flip again.

“So... why I like being Jewish?”

“Yeah,” you whisper softly.

“Well... um... wow. This is a deep question.”

“You’ve had plenty of time to think about it –“

“Yeah, I know,” Mike lets out a long sigh, “It’s just... hard to explain. Why I like something like this. Because it’s a *part* of me, you know?”

“I... don’t.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. That was a stupid question...”

“Not stupid,” you murmur.

“Thanks,” he smiles, and sighs again.

“So... like... first, I like that it’s about what you *do* and how you *live*, rather than what you believe. Because, with everything that’s happened to me... to you... to all of us... a lot of the time it’s hard to believe in stuff. Like God. Or that there’s something more to any of this. It’s really hard. When it comes to belief in Judaism, there’s really only like, one requirement – that if there *is* a God, then you should probably think that he’s *one*, rather than like, multiple things. That’s it. You don’t even necessarily have to believe that God exists, just that God is one. So that’s nice. It’s less pressure, you know? It’s less pressure to... think... the way they ask. That just strikes me as creepy in other religions.”

You nod, frowning.

“And like, the actions and rituals... there are a lot of them. And they’re hard to keep up with. But... they connect me to Jewish people throughout history. They connect me to something bigger than myself. And they connect me to a community, too. It’s like I have this big family, and we all do this weird stuff together, and we’ve *always* done this weird stuff together.”

You laugh.

“And there’s just something beautiful about it. It’s all about... making the world a better place than you left it. Continuing to climb that ladder outwards a future where there isn’t war, or hatred, or cruelty. Just making your way, one rung of the ladder at a time. And I really... really believe in that. Making the world just a little better. Just whatever you can do,” Mike lets out, almost in a whisper.

“That is nice,” you agree.

“And, like, it’s all about studying? And doing good things? And coming together? And I do love to learn stuff. Maybe I’m not so good at it all the time and I find parts of the Torah... *really* confusing. But I *like* that my religion is a bunch of nerds who have spent thousands of years arguing with each other to the point of literally arguing with people who are dead in the form of books.”

You giggle.

“So... I guess those are the big things. The connection, the various... options, and the point of it all. Those are the big things.”

You nod, looking at him and frowning a little bit.

“But what about... heaven? And hell?”

“What about it?”

“Do you believe in it?”

“Well, like I said... Judaism is about what you do, not what you think... more than anything.”

“Yeah, but...”

“So like, whether or not there is an afterlife is... kind of a mixed bag. You can ask multiple Jewish people and your’e going to get different answers back.”

“But is there one?”

“That’s the thing. We don’t know. And you don’t know, either. No one knows.”

You frown.

You want to know.

You want to know that you’ll find Mike again, if...

Anything happened to you.

Or to him.

“Like, I guess we have Mpilo’s... powers. But... we don’t know what there is. We don’t know what happens. They refuse to tell him,” Mike explains.

“Yeah,” you sigh.

“And it’s entirely possible that they don’t actually xist anymore, and he just has like... ghosts of them... imprinted on his brain or something,” Mike pauses, “But... that’s the thing with Judaism. We acknowledge that we don’t know what happens after death. And that’s *okay*. Because we should be foused on being alive, and mking the world a better place while we’re *alive*.”

You frown.

“But... I’m scared...”

“Yeah?”

“Really scared.”

“That’s okay.”

“Why?”

“Life is scary. We don’t know what will happen, or who we’ll be, or anything. It’s better to... accept that... and learn to deal with it... than try to lie to yourself to get out of it, you know?”

You frown more.

“Like, you can pretend that you know there’ll be a heaven, or reincarnation, or whatever. You can. But, you never will know. And something in the back of your mind will always be telling you that. And it’s just... not... a healthy coping mechanism. For that uncertainty. At least, I think so.”

You frown, still.

He’s probably right.

But you don’t like that.

“What about... sin?” you ask, continuing, “I don’t... like it.”

“Well, yeah,” Mike laughs.

“No, but like... in Christianity... everyone’s *born* a bad person –“

“Right, that whole thing. It’s weird. I don’t like it either.”

“And we’re only going to go to heaven because Jesus –“

“Okay, do you want to hear the Jewish take on this?”

You nod.

“Again, it varies a lot, but... it’s not that humans are bad. It’s that humans are flawed. The story of Adam and Eve... it didn’t actually happen. It’s just a story. A metaphor. For why people make mistakes.”

“Oh...”

“You didn’t think it actually *happened*, did you?”

"No. The earth is much older than that."

"Exactly. But like, humans are imperfect. So, for Jewish people, sinning is more... just... missing out on an opportunity. To be a better person. To act humanely. You miss the mark. So you just try again the next time. It's... less pressure."

"I like that," you murmur.

"Yeah. It's nice."

"What about... Jesus?"

"Oh geez."

"Sorry..."

"No, it's okay. Um. We don't think he's the Messiah."

"Why not?"

"Because the Messiah is supposed to come *after* we make the world a better place. When we've climbed the whole ladder. Does the ladder seem... climbed... to you?"

"No," you say, frowning.

"He or she isn't the child of God because, like, that isn't a thing. They're just a descendant of a Jewish King who's supposed to usher in this perfect world after we've made it happen, start a government from Israel, bring all the Jewish people home to Israel, and like... usher in this better time. I dunno about you, but I don't think *any* of that has happened since Jesus was born, do you?"

"No," you laugh.

"Exactly," Mike grins.

"So are Christians just... delusional?"

"Yeah, but I don't *tell* them that."

You giggle more.

"I like... all the things you do. The holidays and rituals. And the prayers are really beautiful," you murmur.

"But...?"

"I'm still not sure."

"Maybe you should talk to the Rabbi."

"Yeah," you agree, "I should. I think."

"You don't have to be religious, Jane. You really don't. It doesn't bother me either way."

"I know," you smile, leaning in and kissing him, "But... I really like Judaism. A lot. I just want to make sure it's for the right reasons before I... commit to anything."

"Make sense," Mike agrees, "Well, I'll still help however I can."

"Thank you," you murmur, and you kiss him, and you both pick up your chemistry textbooks again.

But you think you're getting closer.

Even if it's just a little bit.

J U N E 1 1 1 9 8 7

"Finals are over, we're free for the summer, so far there hasn't been a major mental breakdown on the horizon," Dustin says.

"Way to fucking jinx it, man," Will mutters.

"And let's not ignore [Max](#)'s problems," Lucas sighs.

"I'm just saying, I'm not actively worried about suicide in the party right now."

"That's cheerful."

"For us, it is!"

“We’ve found it. The world’s *lowest* bar.”

“I can’t believe we’ve accomplished this amazing achievement.”

“Really, we should be celebrating –“

“Oh my *God*.”

“What are you kids doing?”

You all look up to see Wiconi walking over to you all, her hands in her pockets as she frowns at you.

“Wiconi? What are you doing here?” Mike asks in confusion.

“Oh, Renee wanted to talk to Hopper about... things... and the kids are getting doctor check ups... and Mpilo is... somewhere,” Wiconi frowns, “And I saw you all sitting out here so I thought I’d bother you.”

“Truly amazing,” Dustin jokes.

“So you want to do something to... celebrate?”

“Being alive,” Lucas affirms, though he looks grumpy.

Wiconi sighs.

“I’m sorry, kid...”

“Yeah, this sucks. Nothing to do about it.”

Wiconi frowns.

“There are lots of things to do about it –“

“Well I don’t want to,” Lucas says, standing up, “I don’t want to hurt her anymore.”

“Lucas,” Mike sighs.

“Don’t *Lucas* me! Half of this is my fault! And there’s nothing I can do to help! Nothing at all!” Lucas shouts.

“Kid, kid, kid,” Wiconi says, grabbing his shoulder, “Deep breaths.”

Lucas looks up at her desperately, tears starting to pool in his eyes.

“But –“

“Look, we’re trying to figure the situation out,” Wiconi says softly, “And, until then, you need to distract yourself, so you don’t go crazy.”

Lucas takes a deep breath, and nods.

“Come on, kids. Let’s go for a walk,” Wiconi offers.

You all start walking through town, Mike holding your hand and squeezing it tightly, making you briefly forget about Max, or the nosebleeds, or how it was cold enough for you to want a sweatshirt in the summer.

“How is the lab?” Dustin asks, frowning at Wiconi as you all walk through the streets.

“It’s... the lab,” Wiconi grumbles, “I’m not happy I’m going in for testing, but if it’s what’ll keep those kids out... then... fine.”

“Do you need to vent anger?” you ask softly.

“Yeah, probably,” Wiconi agrees.

“We could go dye your hair a new color,” Dustin offers.

“Actually,” Wiconi grins, “I have a better idea.”

“Uh...” Mike frowns, “What?”

“I’m gonna give you guys *makeovers*.”

“Oh.... No...” Will whispers.

“Oh yes,” Wiconi cackles, “Prepare yourselves my friends.”

“Oh *no*,” Mike sighs.

You giggle loudly as Wiconi drags you to her car, driving off towards the mall, a giant grin on her face.

“How... is this relaxing for you?” Will asks seriously.

“Because it makes me think about something else. Also, it gives me the opportunity to make you all into the punks you deserve to be.”

“I’m already a punk,” you protest.

“You’re excluded from this,” Wiconi promises.

“Yay!”

“Lucky,” Mike grumbles.

“You’ll be fine,” you giggle.

“You should have some thing too, though,” Will says.

“I’ve... wanted to dye the end of my hair,” **you** admit softly.

“Perfect!” Wiconi cheers.

You all go around the mall together in a blur, buying new clothes, going to a hair salon, and the ends of your hair are dyed a vibrant purple. **Mike** gets blue streaks in his hair, and he looks so good with some eyeliner you can’t get over it.

Everyone comes out of there looking just a little more tough.

And you love it

No matter how many weird stares the town gives you.

J U N E 2 3 1 9 8 7

“That’s the fifth one,” Dad mutters, “The fifth one *today*.”

“What does this mean?” Joyce whispers, you all sitting around the kitchen table.

“It means that everyone is having nosebleeds in town and I have

literally no idea why,” Dad grunts, Jonathan and Will looking at each other nervously across from you, “And the Doctors and the people at the Lab don’t know either. The Doctors blame the dry air and the people at the Lab say it’s not Upside-Down related.”

“But you think it has to do with the Upside Down?” Jonathan asks.

“I don’t have any better explanations for sudden nosebleeds. It’s not like the world has been exposed to an infinite number of psychic bacteria,” Dad grumbles.

“What if the Lab... released them? Or something,” you whisper.

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?” Will asks seriously.

“Because they’re expensive, because they can potentially kill people, because there’s no guarantee they’d actually stay put inside the people, and because they don’t actually *want* a bunch of people running around with psychic powers,” Dad grumbles.

“Yeah, makes sense,” Jonathan sighs.

“So what could it be?” Joyce asks.

“I... don’t know.”

“Maybe the Mind Flayer is trying to take us all out with nosebleeds,” Will offers.

“No offense, kid, but I have no idea how he’d accomplish that.”

You just frown more.

The phone rings again, the second time that dinner.

Joyce groans quietly.

Will and you look at each other in worry.

Jonathan drums his fingers against the table.

“Hello? Oh – okay – okay – slow down – slow down – yeah – okay – I’m on my way.”

Dad hangs up the phone and immediately grabs his hat, running for the door.

“Hop? *Hop* –“

“I have to go now.”

“Where are you going?” Joyce demands.

“There’s been a call in – the Hargrove house,” Dad mutters.

“Max?” you whisper.

“Something... yeah. Something with her. I’m going now, but I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Hopper –“

“I’m going to try and fix this, finally, okay? I’ll be back soon –“

You watch him run out the door nervously, drumming your fingers on the table before running to your room and grabbing your walkie, still unable to really talk to people inside of your mind.

“Mike? Do you copy? *Mike?*” you shout.

You shout it again and again until finally –

“Yeah, I copy – Jane what’s wrong? Over –“

“Max is in trouble, over –“

“Shit, shit shit shit shit shit –“

“Dad’s... going to do something,” you mutter.

“That’s... that’s good. That’s good.”

There’s a long silence.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think the nosebleeds are... something with the Mindflayer? Over...”

Long pause.

“I think so. Yeah.”

More pausing.

“I’m scared.”

“Me too.”

“I should... go tell my mom what’s happening. Over,” Mike says after a while.

“Okay. I love you, over.”

“I love you too. Over and out.”

You walk back into the living room, sitting and waiting with Will and Jonathan and Joyce, staring out in front of you.

Eventually the front door opens, and Dad walks in, Max leaning on his shoulder. You shout in shock and run towards her, grabbing her from Dad and pulling her into a hug. She was battered and bruised all over, with a split lip and a cut over her eye.

“I caught the fucker red-handed – apparently found out about her and Lucas or something,” Dad mutters, “He’s in jail at the moment and the mom might be charged with neglect if I can swing it.”

Max only cries in response. You pull her back to your room and hold her all night as she cries, wishing that it hadn’t gotten like this.

Wishing that none of it was like this.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the long wait between chapters, guys. I've been super busy with work and it's been tiring me out a lot.

We're coming up on the end here... hooooooooo boy howdy. Feel free to give me a comment and let me know what you think of it all... thank you :)

I'm managing my depression okay. Not great, but okay. The comments definitely help though! Thank you :)

37. Tense

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for references to self harm and physical abuse

J U L Y 11 1987

M I K E L E V I N S O N

Max was too shaky to really talk to anyone for a while.

She'd still spend time with you all, and hang out with Lucas more besides, but she spent most of her time not talking, or really doing much of anything – just listening, and trying to not wince.

And that was before she got punted into temporary foster care.

“Just until we figure out where she’s going to go,” Hopper had said.

Though you didn’t know if she would end up anywhere close to you all.

Anywhere close to her *real* family.

It was somewhat horrifying, and somewhat hard to digest.

But you try to anyway.

Just because, ultimately, you kind of have to.

You have to get through this too.

“I just don’t know how to process this,” Will mutters quietly as you sit together, staring at the people milling around the synagogue at the dinner after service, your parents all talking quietly together in another corner.

“I don’t know how to, either,” you agree, sighing softly.

“Like, this is so... *mundane*?”

“To be fair, here, I’m pretty sure I would have had my problems with or without the Upside Down –“

“Yeah, but that accelerated it and definitely contributed. This has... literally nothing to do with it.”

“You’re right. Guess we have to be reminded from time to time that the world sucks outside of this,” you mutter.

“Oh come on, Mike, don’t be like that.”

You sigh heavily yet another time, a weight dropping in your stomach.

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s alright, just, you know, don’t go down that road man.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“That’s the last thing we need – on ten different levels –“

“Trust me, Will, I know.”

Will sighs with you.

“I’m on edge. I shouldn’t be taking it out on you.”

“We’re all on edge. Our friend is going into custody battles and might end up in foster care.”

“Fuck all of this.”

“Agreed.”

“And this is a real-world thing, so we can’t... just...”

“Bend the law to get out of it?”

“Exactly.”

You run your hands through your hair and shut your eyes tightly.

“Still can’t see the future?”

“Not really, nope. Everything’s way too fuzzy.”

“That’s not terrifying at all.”

“Nope, definitely not.”

“What are you two talking about?”

You look up to see Zayde watching you and Will, frowning.

“Uh...” you grimace.

“Everything,” Will admits.

“What did we decide, zeisele? About Shabbat?” Zayde says sternly.

You groan and feel your stomach drop a little with guilt.

“Not to worry about it.”

“Exactly. Now I know you’re tired and preoccupied, so go and do something to take your mind off of it. Study! Come, this week’s Parsha is a doozy!”

You and Will both groan quietly together, but follow Zayde to a back corner to study. And, it does manage to take your mind off of it, at least for a little bit.

Though by that evening you’re up late staring at your ceiling again.

You can’t really stop staring at your ceiling.

J U L Y 1 5 1 9 8 7

“I’m staying at your place.”

You watch Jane enter your house with wide eyes, her stomping in, arms folded across her chest. It’s late at night, it’s hot, and you are very conscious of the fact that you’re not wearing a shirt at this exact moment.

“Uh... can I ask why?”

Jane just huffs, giving you a long glare, before walking into your room and slamming the door.

“I have... no idea what just happened,” you say, pursing your lips together into a thin line.

“Who was that sweetie?” your mom asks, frowning at you while coming out from the kitchen, flour all over her face.

“Mom! We’re not done with the cookies yet!”

“One minute, Holly!”

“Uh... Jane came over,” you say with a frown.

“Mike, you know the rules –“

“Right, but she gave me no explanation either, I didn’t ask her over or anything...”

“Mike...”

“I promise! Really! She walked over in an angry huff, said she was staying over, and slammed the door to my room!”

You’re extremely worried about her and want to run to her immediately, but first you have to emphasize the truth of your words.

You really can’t afford to be grounded again.

“Alright, I’ll go talk to her,” Mom sighs, walking over to the room and knocking on it.

“Jane? Sweetie?”

A low grunt comes from the room.

“Care to explain what’s going on? You can stay over but we need to know what’s happening...”

“Joyce and Dad are driving me CRAZY!” she screams.

Mom bursts out laughing.

“Uh... what?” you ask, eyes widening.

“Wedding planning. I feared this,” Mom snorts.

“They won’t stop talking about FLOWERS. FLOWERS!”

You start giggling too, now, before you can help yourself.

“Stop laughing!” Jane whines from behind the door.

“I’m sorry Jane but this is too funny to not laugh at,” Mom says, “Come on out and I’ll give you an apology hug.”

Jane huffs loud enough for it to be heard, and opens the door. Mom gives her a hug, still chortling, and you giggle behind your hand. Jane glares at you.

“What? Imagine being driven crazy by *flowers!*”

“Never say the f-word again.”

Mom snorts louder.

“MOM!” Holly shouts.

“Oh dear, I better go. The challah won’t twist itself. You can stay, Jane, Nancy’s over at Steve’s.”

Mom smiles and walks back into the kitchen, you turning to Jane and grimacing.

“I’m sorry, though, that they’re obsessed with wedding planning...”

Jane huffs, but pulls you into a hug anyway.

“It’s not long until the wedding now. And then all the planning will be over and you won’t have to deal with it anymore,” you smile at her, “I promise.”

Jane sticks her tongue out at you and kisses you softly, making your heart leap in your chest.

"I'm sorry I stormed in," she apologizes softly, only pulling the slightest amount away from you. Her proximity to your face, her skin shining with sweat and her curly hair pulled up into a bun streaked with red, makes your heart pound much too loudly.

"It's alright," you murmur, leaning in and kissing her again.

You really can't stop yourself from kissing her.

It's one of the few moments of peace –

"Hey now, none of that in the living room. Or the bedroom either," Bubbe says as an afterthought, wandering into the living room and sitting on the couch.

Jane pulls back in embarrassment, her cheeks coloring red.

"Sorry Bubbe," you mumble.

"Oh it's alright, I know what it's like to be young and in love," Bubbe laughs, "But Bubbe's here now, so cut it out."

Jane giggles and you both go back to your room, Bubbe giving you a silly glare as you do.

"But seriously, Dad won't stop talking about the seating chart," Jane begins immediately after you close the door, hitting you with complaints like you've been ambushed, "Joyce keeps arguing with the flower people, and Will isn't helping – if anything Will is making it worse by organizing the dance routines and the chair lifting and everything and no one will talk about *anything* else and the birds keep screaming to be heard over them and then Renee or Mpilo or Wiconi will come in and start talking about psychic stuff and how none of our powers are working right and it's like there's a giant *hurricane* going on in my head and I just needed to leave for like, two seconds."

"Which translates to... staying overnight," you tease.

Jane sticks her tongue out at you.

"I feel safe with you."

You blush furiously and smile at her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she smiles wider, “The safest.”

You pull her into a long hug, still aware that you don’t have a shirt on and you’re already kind of sweaty.

Damn heatwave.

“Are you doing okay?” you ask quietly as she pulls away, looking into her brown eyes and trying to not get lost.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” you take a deep breath, “It’s almost the year anniversary of... everything.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, “Yeah. I’m doing okay. It’s... hard,” she swallows, “But I’ve come a long way.”

“You have,” you agree eagerly, “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mike,” she smiles, leaning up and kissing you on the tip of your nose, “I’m proud of me, too. I’m proud of you!”

“Proud of *me*?”

“You’ve been handling everything very, very well.”

“I guess that’s true,” you say, though you don’t believe it.

“It’s completely true,” Jane promises, “This has all been really scary and a huge reminder of everything and we don’t know what’s going to happen next, but you’re keeping it together. And so I’m keeping it together. And we can deal with it.”

You smile widely at her and pull her into a long kiss, making her squeak.

“I can hear you two!”

Jane pulls away and you both giggle at each other at the sound of Bubbe in the living room.

“Let’s read some books and leave Bubbe in peace,” you suggest.

Jane nods and you sit together, happily reading and talking quietly until it’s time to sleep.

J U L Y 2 2 1 9 8 7

“So when should the case be over?” you ask for the millionth time.

“The *trial*, and soon,” Hopper grumbles for the millionth time.

“This has been dragged on for ages,” Lucas whispers.

“I know, kid, but believe it or not this has actually been quite fast, all things considered. Custody battles are big messes,” Hopper continues.

“And in the meantime Max has been shuffled around to who knows where –“

“She’s in foster care and being taken care of by good people. I’ve asked and made sure of that, personally. She’ll be back in Hawkins soon enough,” Hopper promises.

“Dad,” Jane mutters.

Hopper and Jane exchange a long look before he frowns.

“I hope. I hope she’ll be back in Hawkins soon enough,” Hopper amends.

Lucas groans quietly and paces around the room.

“What happens with her step-dad?” you ask softly.

“The case of him being a domestic abuser and Max’s mom being criminally neglectful is still going to be happening,” Hopper explains, “That’ll take longer. Right now they just want to make sure she has somewhere to go.”

“She *can’t* go back to her real dad! He’s not as bad as her step-dad but

he's still a dick!" Lucas shouts before he can stop himself, immediately covering his mouth with his hands.

"I know, kid, but there's only so much I can do. I don't really have legal claim to her and I can't demonstrate financial means to take care of three kids," Hopper sighs.

You grumble angrily in a corner.

"So then I'll take her in! We're doing really well and my parents wouldn't mind –"

"It's always more complicated than that, Lucas. I'm sorry."

Lucas walks out of the room and slams the door furiously.

"Hopper there's gotta be something you can do," you grumble.

"There isn't," Hopper mutters.

Jane glares at him furiously.

"I'm sorry, kids, I am, but this isn't... weirdness lane. I don't have any power here. The government will put her where they think is best and that's not going to be in Hawkins," Hopper sighs.

"Can we at least stop her from going back to her dad?" Dustin asks quietly.

"Maybe. I think they probably will consider it based on her testimony," Hopper pauses, "But... ultimately I don't think it's likely."

"And that's still too far away," you mutter.

"Yes, I know."

You get up and follow Lucas, walking out into the hallway after him. The courthouse is drafty, and cold, and filled with pictures of old white dudes.

"Lucas?"

“What do you want,” Lucas mutters, staring at the wall and folding his legs up against his chest.

“Do you want to talk, man?”

Lucas looks up at you, frowning.

“I thought I could protect her,” Lucas says.

“I know...”

“No just, just... listen,” Lucas takes a deep breath, “You know, when I first wanted her to be in the group, it was selfish.”

You remain silent.

“I wanted to impress a pretty girl who wasn’t put off by the fact that I’m a giant nerd or, you know, black. I hate living in small town Indiana. I can’t wait to fucking get out of here,” Lucas takes a deep breath, “But... when I saw how strong she was and how much of a fighter she was, I realized adding her to the party was... good for us. It would make us stronger.”

You keep listening, wrapping your arm around Lucas’ shoulder comfortably.

“Falling in love with her was... different. Than I thought it would be. We don’t... it’s not the same energy that you and Jane have. But I don’t mind. I care about her, and she cares about me,” Lucas pauses, “We help each other. We protect each other. She’s protected me from so much shit. I think she’s punched more racists in the face than I have.”

You laugh appreciatively.

“And I want to protect her too. She hardly ever needs it. I just keep her safe from her family. And... now I can’t do that. I can’t do that, and I feel lost and helpless and I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t know, either. It’s bullshit.”

“The biggest of bullshits,” Lucas agrees, “If we survive this giant mess

of a situation with the Upside Down and everything, I'm getting the fuck out of here."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I love you guys and I'll keep in touch, but I hate Hawkins. I'm going to leave. Get out to LA. Learn about astronomical engineering and eventually join NASA. Learn about the weird that isn't out to get me," Lucas pauses, "The vastness of space that doesn't include racial-clensing smoke monsters or psychic powers."

"You definitely should."

"What about you?"

You look at Lucas seriously.

"I don't think I'm getting out of... whatever this is."

"Mike..."

"This isn't a suicidal thing, man. I'm a psychic, Jane's my..."

"Girlfriend?"

"That's not a strong enough word."

"Fair enough."

"Jane's my person, I'm way too wrapped up in all of this. I'm not getting out alive. And that's okay," you say softly.

"Mike –"

"It's okay, if I can protect the life of one person."

"So protect your own!"

"I have to use my gift to help people. With great power comes great responsibility, Lucas, okay? I know you get that. I know you just don't want me to die. I know no one wants me to die. I know that possibly better than anyone does," you take a deep breath, "But... I gotta help."

Lucas frowns, nodding.

“Well I gotta help too.”

“Man, if you want to escape, you can, don’t –“

“Don’t what? Be stupid?” Lucas snorts, “Nah. I’m going to go forward with training people. People are starting to sense how weird it is. And if I can help one person to defend themselves against this crap...”

You nod, looking at him seriously.

“Then I’ll have done my part. And I can leave with a clear conscience,” Lucas takes a deep breath, “Look, just... call me. When we know about Max. I can’t wait here anymore.”

“Alright man...”

Lucas stuffs his hands into his pockets and walks out, you watching him go worriedly.

“Mike?”

You turn around and see Jane frowning at you in confusion.

“Where’s Lucas?”

“He had to get out of here,” you explain softly.

“Okay,” Jane nods, “Well, they’re going to be announcing the decision any time now...”

You sigh and follow her back in, waiting with everyone else until individuals come out from the small courtroom, talking and mingling. The judge walks up to Hopper and talks to him quietly, as the rest of you watch anxiously.

“She’s going to her Aunt’s in California,” Hopper mutters softly.

“Well... at least it’s not her dad,” Dustin offers.

“Yeah, but she’s still too far away!” you shout.

“Kid, I know, but there’s nothing we can do about that now. We just have to be glad she’s going somewhere safe, and her mom and stepdad are far away from her. It’s the little victories.”

You nod, but you still feel sick to your stomach.

JULY 26 1987

There really isn’t anything quite like a wedding. Especially a Jewish one.

Glasses smashed, cups of wine drunk and blessings recited as the couple circles each other under the wedding canopy –

Not in that order, of course –

And a beautiful marriage contract signed and held up for all to see while the Rabbi talks about love and the importance of love –

It takes you out of yourself, if only for a second.

Jane looks at you and smiles widely at you, and you smile widely at her, and you can’t help but feel your heart fluttering in your chest at the thought of “Jane” and “wedding” in the same sentence.

And it’s nice to see Hopper and Joyce looking so happy, especially when they haven’t really been that happy lately –

Few of you have.

“MAZEL TOV!” someone shouts, and everyone starts singing at the top of their lungs and clapping, and you join in, jumping up to your feet and clapping with the beat as Jane does so next to you, the two of you beaming at each other and dancing and clapping and singing in unison.

Hopper and Joyce run down from the canopy together, holding hands and laughing and leading the way into the next room, Joyce’s face practically glowing and Hopper’s *definitely* doing so. Will looks at you and Jane and you all grin at each other eagerly.

Dustin and Lucas are still both subdued.

“Come on guys,” Will urges, “Max has already written us and she wants us to keep cheered up, right? You guys can’t be sulking around on Joyce and Hopper’s wedding, that’s the *opposite* of what she wants.”

Dustin sighs and nods. Lucas just glares more, before shrugging and frowning.

“I’ll try at least, I guess.”

“Come on man!” Dustin says, “It’s a good day – two people are *married* now when they *weren’t* before, the sun is *shining* but isn’t out to *murder* us all – there isn’t a smoke monster infiltrating anyone’s *brains* –“

“Yeah, yeah,” Lucas laughs weakly, the first time since Max left. You grin and wrap your arm around his shoulder, the whole group leading him into the other room where people are sitting around at eating. You sit together, at the table next to Joyce and Hopper, everyone laughing and chatting and acting silly.

“No, okay, so here’s the way things should go in the next Back to the Future Movie –“ Lucas says loudly.

“Oh here we go again –“

“My theories are *foolproof* –“

“Yeah, proof you’re a fool –“

“Hey!”

“Shh!”

You all look and blush as Joyce gives you a look, but you grin at her and she grins back at you. You resume discussions intently, talking quietly around the table and beaming at each other.

Lifting up Joyce and Hopper in the chairs is an utter trip – especially because Hopper looks queasy the entire time – and it’s ridiculously difficult to keep the two aloft but, still, you and your friends all laugh together and sing and clap and participate in the hora, Jane’s hair

coming loose from its bun and framing her face in a way that makes you lose your breath.

“Alright,” Dustin says, all of you sitting back down and exhausted on the sidelines as people keep dancing, “New challenge.”

“Oh no,” you groan.

“Don’t worry, you’re exempt.”

“Oh thank God.”

Jane bursts out laughing.

“We are about to start our *Junior Year*,” Dustin says firmly, “We are *adults*.”

“Very much untrue –“

“We are *coming into our own time*,” Dustin insists, “This is our time. This is our *test*.”

“Please don’t start talking about socialization and –“

“You and I are both pining over people who would want us to be *happy* –“

“I’m not *pinning* –“

“She’s in California,” Dustin says firmly, “You both agreed that trying long distance wasn’t going to help anything and staying friends would give you a chance in the future. We are now *upperclassmen*. We have experienced loads and have tons to offer.”

“Oh geez –“

“So we are going to *just dance* with someone here. Just dance! You too Will.”

“I am *not* dancing with a girl –“

“With a boy! I would never suggest otherwise –“

“In *public*?”

“If anyone has a problem with it we’ll kick ‘em out.”

“Okay, first of all, no, I’m not doing that, and second of all, I’m not desperate like you losers, I have a boyfriend,” Will says firmly.

“Wait *what*?!”

“Yup.”

“You can’t’ve –“

“I do!”

“Proove it!”

“He’s not ready to be out about it yet, and neither am I! But I don’t need to dance with anyone because of it –“

“Come *on*, man –“

“Nope! You can’t drag it out of me! But you two should definitely dance with people.”

“You couldn’t have stuck up with me?” Lucas groans.

“Nope. You need to take your mind off of stuff. You can’t afford to get more depressed right now.”

“He’s right,” Jane agrees.

“I hate all of you.”

“There are tons of pretty girls here and dancing is fun,” Dustin says, “Come on, man, I’m not challenging you to something ridiculous.”

Lucas sighs, but nods, looking resigned.

You look over at Jane and grab her hand, pulling her out onto the dance floor and spinning her around under your arm.

“Woah!” Jane shouts, beaming up at you.

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” she giggles, the two of you swaying back and forth. You watch curiously as both Dustin and Lucas try to ask girls from school to dance, to no avail. Dustin looks furious, but Lucas looks relieved.

“Dustin should probably leave Lucas alone about girls,” you say softly.

“Yeah, but... I don’t know,” Jane sighs.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to make him uncomfortable, but he *is* going to get stuck in a rut about Max. She’s been gone for ages – since she got shunted into foster care. We all knew... it wasn’t likely she’d be able to stay. This is healthier for everyone. And pining is just going to make him... vulnerable.”

“Yeah,” you sigh, “I just... don’t like making him uncomfortable. And I know that this sucks and it’s going to take a while for him to get over it.”

“It’s okay for him to take a while to get over it. We all will, and of course he should take longer,” Jane pauses, “But... he can’t let it destroy him.”

“You and I both know that Lucas is the most mentally healthy of us.”

“And he gets anxious! Really badly anxious! All the time!”

“He can handle this.”

“I disagree.”

You stick your tongue out at her and she smiles back at you.

“Guess we’ll disagree then. Either way, we should let him... deal with this.”

“And only offer help if he asks.”

“Exactly.”

“Glad we’re on the same page about that,” you snort.

She flicks you lightly in the arm, “We disagree all the time!”

“True!”

“It’s fine!”

“It is!”

You lean in and kiss her, and she kisses you back softly, making your heart flutter again as you kiss each other slowly on the dance floor. You kiss for so long that you really and truly begin to lose track of time, just lost in each other while music softly plays around you.

“Kids.”

You look up in embarrassment to see Hopper looking at you both with red cheeks.

“Can we... not... right now.”

“Sorry Dad,” Jane mumbles.

“Yeah, yeah, just... you know... chill...”

“It’s a wedding?” you offer.

Hopper grumbles and walks away, making Jane burst into laughter.

“I’m calling this payback for the months of wedding planning hell.”

“Good call,” you agree, grinning at her.

She pulls you in for another long kiss and you grin into it, holding onto her tightly and forgetting about everything else, just for a moment.

You have to hold on to each of these moments when you can.

AUGUST 7 1987

"There have been five more nosebleeds this week," Hopper sighs as you all sit together, the various psychics all putting their heads together and talking.

"It's us, it's because there are too many of us in one place –"

"But *none of them have psychic symptoms!*" you shout, "They can't be _"

"Look, Mike, you are *proof* that this is a contagious condition, and the more of us around the more likely that bacteria could pass –"

"Wiconi," you say firmly, glaring at her across the table, "It was because of kissing. It was not because of anything more than that. You know this. Please, *please*, don't turn this into something different."

Wiconi frowns.

"We don't have proof it could be airborne virulent," Renee agrees, "And it's irresponsible to suggest so without proof. We could cause a health panic, never mind the fact that it would reveal the fact that we exist to the public, which is a big... mistake."

"To say the least," Hopper mutters.

"Alright, so what – there are just a bunch of extra nosebleeds?" Wiconi demands, "Sounds fake but whatever."

"It's not just that, though," Joyce mutters.

Everyone looks at her in shock.

"Heard things through the grape vine. Nurses at the hospital. Lots of people... are bleeding from their legs. Randomly getting cuts and such from there. And... their wrists," Joyce frowns, "How has this not been reported to you, Hop?"

"I... I don't know," Hopper frowns.

"That *definitely* isn't a psychic thing," Renee mutters.

"You know, when people try to kill themselves I hear it. Even if they have suicidal thoughts, those reach the plane of the dead," Mpilo points out.

"Why must we talk about the plane of the dead again," Hopper groans.

"It's important," Mpilo snaps, angry – causing you and everyone else to watch him in shock.

"My point is, both of those injuries are self-harm injuries, right?"

"Not necessarily – they could just be clumsy, or –"

"Or nothing," Mpilo shakes his head, "Those are too specific, and you say they're getting cuts all over?"

"Yeah. Little ones."

"Exactly. So like self harm scars."

You feel your skin grow cold and clammy.

"So you're telling me being depressed is contagious?"

"I'm saying I've heard nothing new."

Everyone stares at each other for a long.

"So... depression *wounds* are happening, mysteriously, and no one is depressed," Hopper says.

"Not any more so than usual. Though I'm sure no one's a fan of this infinitely cold weather. We had a few normally hot days here and there, yes? But not normal. Not normal at all."

"So injuries as an epidemic," Renee scoffs, "There has to be something else."

"This is *Hawkins*," Hopper snaps.

"Always go with the weird explanation," Joyce agrees.

“Did we give them this? By having us all here?” Jane asks softly.

“No, definitely not,” Renee says, “This doesn’t match up to psychic symptoms apart from the bloody noses.”

“Just... a lot of blood from various places,” you mutter, frowning.

“At the very least, people are getting freaked out enough about how weird this to actually go to Lucas’ apocalypse training sessions,” Wiconi jokes.

“Is that *actually* a good thing?” Hopper groans, holding his face in his hands.

“It’s a good thing that people are prepping for whatever is coming, yes!” you shout, before you can stop yourself. Jane looks at you worriedly, but you try to smile at her reassuringly anyway.

It’s nothing.

It’s definitely nothing.

Right?

Right.

“Well, probably, but we don’t want a mass panic on our hands,” Hopper mutters.

“I’d rather have a prepared populous getting panicked than an unprepared one being even more panicked later,” Renee points out.

“Fair enough,” Hopper groans, “Just... keep guns at minimum. For now.”

“None of us are helping Lucas lead these things,” Wiconi points out.

Hopper groans louder.

“Deal with that later, Hop. One problem at a time,” Joyce mutters.

“Right. Well, let’s adjourn and think about this,” Hopper sighs, “This is all just... making my head hurt. At this point.”

“Sounds fair chief,” Wiconi mutters.

“Curb the attitude.”

“Right. Sounds fake.”

Hopper groans, but you leave with the group, staring out in front of you.

It’s too similar.

All of it is too similar.

AUGUST 13 1987

“Mike?”

You look up from your book to see Jane frowning at you, her face somewhat pale.

“Yeah Jane?”

“I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Figured... what out?”

“The sickness. Why everyone is bleeding. Getting nosebleeds and getting cuts and getting sick weirdly. Everything. I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Okay?” you sit up, “Um... can we talk about it quick?”

“Why?”

“Because talking about this too much is making me really... I dunno. It’s reminding me of my... of how bad I got. It’s not making me feel okay. I’m having flashbacks and panic attacks and I keep thinking I’m going to get bad again and I don’t want that. So I really just...”

You take a deep breath.

“I need to not talk about it.”

"But that's exactly it!" Jane shouts.

You look at her in shock.

"It... what?"

"Think about it. Nosebleeds. Cut wrists and thighs. Super cold weather."

"Yeah..."

"These remind me but, more especially, *you*, of everything we've... endured. These past few years."

"Yup, it's the worst, why are we talking about this?"

"*Mike*," Jane says firmly, grabbing you by the shoulders and holding them tightly, "*Think, Mike*."

"I really, *really* can't."

"Fine," Jane nods, swallowing, "The Mind Flayer. Him. He knows all this stuff, this stuff that reminds us, that hurts us. He *knows*."

"He's also trapped in the Upside Down."

"Is he?" Jane takes a shaking breath, "We destroyed most of him. Not all. There was some of him that escaped. Before Dustin started collecting in the jars. Also who knows how much of him was out there and never went into a person."

"I... guess..."

"And he still has some ties to this world. He's been here, he can affect it. You know that and I know that."

"Unfortunately."

"Why is it... so crazy... to suggest that he is causing this?"

"But *why*?"

"*To freak us out!*" Jane shouts, "To freak us out and – and – make us

weaker. Make us more prone to letting our powers go wild. And if we let our powers go wild... at the same time..."

"Then we open the portal," you whisper, the wind knocked out of your chest.

"Exactly."

"Jane, what are we supposed to *do*?"

"I don't know," Jane whispers, "Try to not let it get to us."

"It's *already getting to me!*"

"Me too. Ever since the nosebleeds started and I thought I'd infected Will."

"He had a nosebleed?" you whisper.

"Yeah. He's had a bunch."

You look at each other for a long time.

"What do we do?" you ask softly.

"We try to keep each other together," Jane says firmly, "We can do that. We're *good* at that."

"You're right," you agree, "You're... you're right."

"We have to be there for each other," Jane pauses, "And... Mike?"

"Yeah?"

She leans in and kisses you, whispering "I love you" against your lips. Your heart stops pounding in a bad way and switches to the quick pounding of when you are overwhelmed by her.

So overwhelmed.

In such a good way.

"Whatever happens... I..."

“Please, Jane, don’t –“

“Whatever happens, I want to make sure we don’t miss out on anything.”

“What do you mean?”

She swallows and looks at you seriously.

“I don’t know yet. But. I want to experience everything with you.”

“And I want to experience everything with you,” you whisper hoarsely.

And she pulls you into another kiss, and for a moment, you can pretend that it’s okay.

Notes for the Chapter:

HOLY SHIT ON A CRACKER I AM SO SORRY

This is what happened:

- I got hella fucking depressed because of work (more on that later)
- I wasn't... thrilled that two of my biggest (biggest meaning: longest comments) commenters kind of fell awol for reasons that are totally fair!!! Totally totally fair!!! But it didn't help
- MY MOM GOT DEATHLY ILL. Like I literally thought I was going to lose her like ten times. She had a really bad infection and got her LEG amputated and she is SIXTY EIGHT. She's recovering now and doing physical therapy but that was ROUGH and KILLED my inspiration.
- There was Drama™ about Fanfiction that made me scared to write
- I... need to switch PhD programs. Probably. I don't know. I need to decide. This also did not help.
- I have been inspired to do one million other things and I am SORRY
- I was pissed that Billy/Steve story passed me

- This is kind of a low point in the story and so I had writer's block too!

SO WHY AM I COMING BACK TO THIS?

Guilt. Finally the Jewish guilt kicked in.

Also I weirdly got inspired by On My Block. You guys HAVE to watch that PLEASE I need a season 2.

So PLEASE comment, THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR PATIENCE AND I'M SO SORRY. Hopefully I'll update regularly again but I can't make any promises. Just continue to be patient with me <3 Thank you all so much!!!!!!

38. Starting Over

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for extensive discussions of teenage sexuality because apparently I like to torture us all. Also, point of view changes between both Mike and Jane in this chapter.

AUGUST 24 1987

JANE HOPPER

“This is it.”

You look over at Dustin in confusion, smirking as he holds his arms up over his head as you all walk through the hallway. Your backpack feels too heavy, and everything around you just feels...

Disconnected.

From you, from the world. From reality.

You wish you could reconnect –

Even if it's futile.

“What is it?” Mike asks, rolling his eyes.

“This is our *Junior Year!*”

You, Mike, Will, and Lucas groan in unison as Dustin does a little dance. The other students in the hallway give him a wide berth, as well, as he fills up the floor and twists around himself.

“Are you insane?” Lucas asks after a long minute, glaring at him, “Why would we be *happy about this?*”

“Because! We're alive, it's a new year, and I don't know, I have a good feeling about this one.”

Will snorts out loud, making you giggle before you can stop yourself.

“I mean come on guys. Yeah the world might be ending –“

“And the award for the biggest non sequitur goes to –“

“*BUT*, we are older, we all can drive now –“

“I can’t drive,” you mutter quietly.

“You’re close to getting your license, it counts. *Anyway*, we can drive, we can go out, we have so much more independence! Many of us even have *money!*”

“Money. Yup. That’s a thing we have. Residents of a small town in one of the poorer neighborhoods *of* that small town –“

“We have *jobs* –“

“Who are still paying off *massive credit card bills* from driving across the country last year –“

“We’re on steady payback schedules!”

“Let’s face it,” Will smirks, “We’re broke, we’re stuck, and there’s nothing to do but sit around and worry.”

“You guys just don’t have any imagination,” Dustin grumbles, “We’re *upperclassmen!*”

“We’re juniors. Statistically speaking,” you say, rolling your eyes, “This is the most stressful year of High School because this is the last chance to get it right before college application time. And then, on top of that, the world is ending.”

“We don’t *know* the world is ending,” Dustin points out.

“Yes, we do,” Mike snorts.

“No, we don’t!”

“Yes, we *do!*”

“No, we *don’t!*”

“Yes, we –“

“Okay circular arguments are fun and all, but I’ve got to get to psych. Have fun arguing through physics,” Lucas snorts.

“Bye Lucas,” you wave, rolling your eyes as Dustin and Mike continue to bicker as you walk through the hallway, Will looking at you desperately.

“If I knew how to stop their arguments,” you whisper under your breath, Mike and Dustin not even able to hear you, “I would have done so a long time ago.”

Will groans, and you pat him on the shoulder, amused at the tiredness on his face.

“Well *I’m going* to hold a party!”

The phrase snaps you back to the present, almost hitting you with whiplash, as you turn and look at Dustin in confusion.

“A party?”

“Mom’s out of town.”

“Dustin, when will it get through your head that we’re not regular teenagers?”

“When we turn twenty.”

Will bursts into laughter, holding his face in his hands to quiet it. You start giggling with him, making Dustin grin from ear to ear in triumph.

“See? I’m right.”

“They’re laughing *at you*, genius –“

“No, we’re definitely laughing at you,” you snort.

Mike looks at you, frowning in an exaggerated fashion, and you lean

in to kiss him softly on the cheek.

“I’m sorry Mike,” you grin, “But Dustin’s right. We *are* teenagers.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt to act like it!” Dustin cheers.

“I will come,” Mike pauses, “But I will be that grumpy angsty kid in the corner.”

“It’s okay, every party needs one of those. That way, we can have a big Social Charity moment when we drag you out of the corner and force you to participate against your will –“

“My dream come true –“

“Not to mention, with the world ending and everything, we should probably cram as many experiences in as possible,” Will points out.

You and Mike look at each other for a second longer than your thoughts race, which allows you to start to blush furiously before you look away.

A faint blush appears on Mike’s cheeks as well.

You’ve only had a couple things on your mind, lately, really...

“Exactly! Exactly. So. Jane, can you bring snacks?”

You roll your eyes.

“Sure, Dustin.”

“Mike, can you –“

“I will bring nothing.”

“Can you bring a frown?”

“I... will not bring that.”

“Great! Then you’ll smile.”

“I hate you so much right now.”

“Will, can you get drinks?”

“I can raid my step-father’s liquor cabinet, if that’s what you mean.”

“Perfect –“

You start to tune out the chatter as you can help but feel Mike looking at you, and you want to look back at him, but you’re worried being very obvious in physics class was not an entirely recommended course of action.

You and Will gather the supplies requested in your house, finding the task straightforward due to Dad and Joyce being absent, a note left on the fridge just saying “date night” with no further explanation.

“So,” Will asks, starting the car and driving down the road, “Are you going to tell me what’s been up with you?”

“What do you mean?” you answer, frowning.

“I mean, what’s been up with you. You’ve been acting weirder than usual.”

“I have not!”

“Trust me, I know. I know you, Jane.”

You stick your tongue out at him, before looking back out the window.

“I dunno.”

“Alright then.”

You take a deep breath again.

“Um... so.... You said a while ago... that you had a boyfriend?”

“Kind of, yeah. But if you’re going to ask me to reveal who he –“

“No, no. I don’t want you to do that. But, um.”

“Um, what?”

“How far have you two gone?”

Will looks shocked, practically stopping the car and staring at you with wide eyes.

“*Why* –“

“You don’t have to answer –“

“But *why* –“

“And I don’t have to answer that!”

“*Jane* –“

“Look!” you shout, slamming your hand on the dashboard angrily, “Look, Will, the world is ending and I don’t want to die without, I don’t know, experiencing sex in a good way, okay? Why is this a crime for me to admit?”

Will grimaces, “It’s not.”

“*Thank* you, geez –“

“You’re welcome.”

“The way people act around me, seriously –“

“*In our defense* –“

“I know.”

A pause thick enough to make you choke quickly surrounds you.

“Uh, to answer your question, we’ve... done more than kiss. But not much more. Because... I dunno. We don’t feel ready.”

“Fair enough. That’s all I was asking.”

“Alright then.”

“Good talk.”

“Excellent talk.”

“Fantastic talk.”

A long silence settles over the two of you as Will pulls up outside of Dustin’s house.

“Are you sure you’re ready, Jane? Is *Mike* ready?” he asks quietly.

“I dunno.”

“I just... the end of the world isn’t... necessarily... the right reason for this kind of thing.”

“Yeah. But it feels like it for us.”

“Okay.”

He smiles at you awkwardly, and you smile awkwardly back.

“Shall we go in?”

“Why not.”

“Dustin, for one –“

“Yeah but he scares me more if we *don’t* go in.”

You laugh with Will and you both exit the car, carrying your food and contraband up into the house that’s already loud and musical, but relatively devoid of people.

“Come in, come in –“

“Did you remember to *invite people* to your party, Dustin?”

Dustin glares at you and snatches the potato chips out of your hands, “I *did*, I just gave the gang an earlier start time so that we could get set up.”

“You could have just said ‘come early’ –“

“And risk Mike being an hour late? Never.”

You snort and Will grins with you, making Dustin glare at the two of you as you start to set up the food on the counter.

“Uh, so...” Will says, his voice trailing off.

“Yes?”

“Have you... talked to... you know. Anyone else about this?”

“Uh, no.”

“You probably should, before.”

“*Why?*” you demand, so mortified your cheeks turn red.

“Because... well... I mean, the stuff that can happen if you...”

“Like?”

Will gives you a long look and you frown at him, Dustin shouting at you both from somewhere else in the house, but not actively coming over to get your attention.

Finally Will mimes his stomach bulging out, giving you another long look.

“*Oh.*”

“Yeah.”

“Uh, well... that’s a good point.”

“Exactly. Plus you should probably talk about just... what it’s like. In general. When you’re not necessarily going to get triggered by the discussion itself. You know?”

“Yeah,” you sigh, “It’s just... awkward.”

“Well... can I be blunt?”

“I’d prefer it.”

Will grins at you and you shove him gently in the arm.

"If you can't talk about this stuff openly... are you really ready?"

Your mouth opens and closes a few times in a row, as you are unable to compose a response.

"I... guess you have a point."

"Exactly," Will pats you on the arm, "Look, Jane, I'm not saying don't do it. You clearly have been edging around this with him and, you have a point, the world is crashing around our heads."

"*THIS* again?" the voice of Dustin shouts from the next room.

"But... I really think you should keep thinking about it. A lot, you know?"

"Yeah," you nod, "Yeah. You have a good point."

"I usually do."

"Could you two *gossips* actually *set things up* for me? Yeesh!" Dustin shouts, walking into the room now and glaring at you both. You reach over and fluff up his hair, making him just glare at you more.

"We're helping man, calm yourself," Will says, rolling his eyes.

"Could have fooled me."

"Are you yelling at my psychic girlfriend again, Dustin?" Mike says, walking into the room and glaring.

"Yes, yes I am."

"You know she could fling you across the room like you're nothing –"

"But *would* she?"

You frown at him, raising an eyebrow. Dustin squeaks.

"Yes. Yes you would."

Mike grins at you and you run to hug him, holding tightly to him.

“But look, Dustin, I’m here on time.”

“A miracle in our times.”

“I thought I’d give you a gift.”

“Of course.”

“Where is everyone, though?”

“I invited the gang here early so we could set up.”

Mike glares daggers at Dustin, who just beams at him.

“I told you he’d be pissed,” you mutter, snorting. Dustin raises his middle finger at you, and you snap at it, making him squeak.

“Why would you *bite my finger* –“

“For fun,” you respond, shrugging. Mike is laughing loudly in your arms, almost doubling over, which is awkward when he’s more than half a foot taller than you.

“Where’s Lucas, though?” Will asks seriously.

“That’s... a good question,” Dustin admits.

“Maybe he’s not feeling up to it man,” Mike mutters. Dustin sighs.

“This was partly *for him*.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Mike frowns.

“Like... he really needs to... I don’t know. Let go isn’t the right word, but –“

“Dustin,” Will says firmly. Dustin turns to face him, and Will is glaring at him.

“Lucas’ girlfriend was physically abused by her family and, in rescuing her from that situation, was forced to move very far away, right as the world started to end.”

Dustin sighs.

“Give him a break,” Will finishes, frowning.

“Yeah... okay.”

You all continue to set up in silence, Mike looking at you worriedly as you do so. You just smile at him in response.

“I’m okay, Mike.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

MIKE LEVINSON

You really, really, *really* can’t stand huge parties.

To be fair, of course, your experiences with them haven’t been exactly *positive*, per-say, especially given how many times you’ve had unfortunate mental health episodes at them –

But at the same time, it just isn’t your *scene*. You like to just chill with your friends and play games together or watch a movie, not stand in the middle of so. many. people. With so. much. loud. music.

And yet, most of the school was in Dustin’s little house, dancing and singing and drinking and eating, and you were just kind of on the wall, staring out at it all. Even Jane was dancing, mostly with Dustin and Will, and you were just staying out of it.

“Hey,” Lucas says, sidling up to you.

“Hey,” you respond, surprised, “I didn’t expect you to show up. It’s been a few hours since Dustin told us to get here.”

“Yeah, well,” Lucas pauses, “Felt rude to not come at all.”

“I’m sure Dustin appreciates it.”

“Eh, he probably hasn’t noticed –“

“Oh trust me, he did.”

“Fair enough.”

You stand together in silence for a while, you sipping on your punch and Lucas folding his arms across his chest, glaring at two students who attempted to walk up to you both, who then proceeded to run away.

“How are you holding up?” you ask awkwardly, trying to fill the silence with something other than terrible pop music.

“Just trying to focus on the end goal. Survival, getting out of here, moving somewhere better. Finding Max again.”

Lucas’ gaze is distant looking, hard to really make out. You feel worry settle in the pit of your stomach, and a small amount of sweat break out over your brow.

“Is that really it?” you ask quietly.

Lucas turns to look at you, first glaring; but after a few seconds his expression begins to soften, and he lets out a long sigh.

“I don’t know, man.”

You nod silently, you both just frowning at each other.

“Alright, enough introspection you two!” Dustin shouts, grabbing one of each of your arms and dragging you into the middle of the throng of people. You should in protest but Lucas is laughing, presumably at your face. You find Jane, who beams at you, and immediately you start to forget the worry deep in your stomach.

You grab her hands and spin her around, making her giggle, a sound that is more music to your ears than anything on the speaker. You try to think, just for a second, like you’re a regular old teenager.

Just a boy and his girl.

Just a boy twirling his girlfriend around under your arm, before bringing her back to your chest, helping her to nestle there as you

swayed to the music.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

You beam at her, kissing her softly on the lips, holding her hands tightly in yours.

“I love you.”

Jane beams at you, looking much more cheerful than before, and happily swaying her hips while you sway in time with her.

“See? Is this so *hard*?” Dustin asks, cha-chaing his way over to you both and twirling his hands around in weird white-boy dances.

“No, it’s not,” you laugh, Jane giggling with you.

“I’m proud of you. Don’t forget to *miingle*!”

You both watch Dustin in bemusement as he dances away to other party guests. Jane leans up and kisses your cheek, making you turn back to look at her.

The look in her eyes is almost overwhelmingly unfathomable.

It makes you gulp.

You sway closer again, her holding onto your neck as tightly as she ever has, you holding your arms all the way around her waist as close as you can. She buries her head in the crook of your neck, making you breathe in sharply, aware of how close she is in every single way.

“Mike?”

Her voice tickling your ear makes you jump.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to go somewhere?”

Your heart is now pounding much, much, much too hard.

You nod mutely, holding her hand gently as she leads you through the house, away from the loud and annoying groups of teenagers drinking and partying to their hearts content. She leads you into Dustin's room, closing the door behind you both.

Everything gets much quieter very quickly.

"Um... so..." you start, feeling a blush rise rapidly to your cheeks.

"I just... wanted to talk," Jane says, smiling at you.

You let out a long breath, "Oh, okay."

"Why? Did you think I wanted... something... else?"

"Um... kind of."

"Well... that *is* what I wanted to talk about."

"Oh!"

The blush returns as fast as it had disappeared.

"Come, sit," she whispers, sitting down on the bed and patting the space next to her. You do so, swallowing and taking her hand in yours.

"So," she pauses, looking determined, that little look on her face that made her even more cute in your eyes.

"So," you respond, smirking at her despite yourself.

"So," she repeats, sticking her tongue out at you.

"So!" you laugh, reaching over and tickling her. She screams in surprise, wiggling around underneath your fingers, before reaching back and tickling you in a counter attack. You both laugh together and keep tickling each other, until you're too tired out and lie back on the bed, breathing heavily and still giggling.

"Care to finish your sentence, Jane?" you finally laugh out, turning

and looking at her while still lying down, your breath finally beginning to slow down.

“Oh, yeah,” she snorts, looking amused with herself, “Right, yeah.”

“So...?”

“Not again!”

You both start laughing more, you reaching over to stroke her cheek, leaning in and kissing her on her temple. She blushes and smiles widely at you.

“Well, okay. As you know, the world is ending.”

“Yup!”

“And... I mean... I’ve been getting better.”

“This is true. I’ve been very proud of you.”

“And we’ve talked about... well... er...”

You take a deep breath, “Sex?”

She nods, blushing even more furiously.

“If you’ve changed your mind, Jane, that’s totally fine, I completely understand –“

“No, I haven’t changed my mind, exactly...”

“Then...?”

“We should probably talk to... you know, adults. First.”

You’re so shocked by this sentence that you are unable to continue to speak.

“Mike?” she asks, waving her hand in front of your face, “Mike?”

“Uh... yeah. Okay. Um. Er. Um.”

You take a deep breath to stop your babbling.

“*Why?*”

“Because lots of stuff could still go wrong, we’re nervous, we’re not *really* sure, and in general talking to adults has always worked out better than not talking to adults.”

“Isn’t it a teenage right of passage to go through this very awkward first experience alone?”

“*Mike.*”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Not normal teenagers.”

“Not just that,” Jane rolls her eyes, “but also just... I just want to make sure *I’m* sure. You know?”

“Yeah, I do know,” you pause, “Um... okay. Who do you want to talk to?”

“I want to talk to Dad, I think.”

You frown at her, “Really?”

“Yeah. I know it will be awkward. But... well...”

You wait for her to speak, reaching out and touching her chin, now, stroking your fingers along it while she smiles a little at the touch.

“First off, Joyce is absolutely terrible at talking about this.”

You burst out laughing, your sides hurting from the force of it, you hunching over and giggling hard into your hand.

“I’m serious! Yeah I was on the verge of a breakdown from the topic anyway but her method of delivery of the talk was absolutely terrible.”

You keep laughing, shaking with amusement.

“I’m sorry, you just haven’t really talked about this *because* of the whole trauma part of it, and so you talking about it so frankly is just

absolutely hilarious.”

“Glad I can help?”

“Oh absolutely. I mean I *figured* she wasn’t that great at it but I mean, to be as terrible as you imply –“

“Honestly it was probably worse than I imply because I don’t have a frame of reference and whatever frame of reference I *do* have is royally screwed up, probably –“

“Oh geez,” you sigh, reaching out and stroking her hair. She smiles at you again, clearly still doing okay with this particular topic of conversation.

“But, yeah. I think I’d rather talk to someone else. Probably.”

“Even Hopper?”

“Even Dad.”

You sigh and smile at her.

“I think I might have a better idea?”

She frowns at you, tilting her head to the side and waiting for you to go on.

“Bubbe and Zayde.”

“Huh,” she frowns, “Really?”

“They have a fairly healthy view of sexuality. They are both really close to us. They have a very functional and loving relationship that has lasted decades. They are the least fucked up by the weirdness of this town. And they probably would not be as weirded out by us asking and wanting to talk about it as parents would be,” you explain, the words tumbling out of your mouth as the ideas form rapidly in your head.

“Huh,” Jane pauses, “You know, that’s a good idea.”

“Why, thank you!”

“So... we’re going to talk to Bubbe and Zayde?”

“We’re going to talk to Bubbe and Zayde,” you affirm, nodding with purpose.

She leans in and kisses you deeply, making your heart race again, especially given that you are lying down together on a bed.

Why must you be a hormonal teenage boy on top of everything else?

S E P T E M B E R 6 1 9 8 7

J A N E H O P P E R

You arrive at the Levinsons’ house early that morning, wringing your wrists a little with your hands, waiting for the door to open.

Mike said she’d be alone. Mike said she’d be alone. Mike said –

“Jane? What a pleasant surprise!”

Bubbe opens the door, beaming at you and giving you a hug.

“Mike isn’t home right now, but –“

“I know,” you swallow nervously, smiling at her awkwardly, “I, uh... I was hoping to talk to you.”

Bubbe raises an eyebrow, looking at you in amusement.

“To little old *me*?”

“To little old you,” you laugh, smiling more at her.

“Alright, well come on in. I’m just practicing the shofar.”

“You play the shofar?” you ask in confusion, following her in to the house. You can smell the distinctive smell of yeast rising, and eagerly walk over to the kitchen to see bowls set out, damp towels set over them so the yeast will rise. You lift up one of the towels and look down to see dough set with apples sprinkled throughout.

“Oh! Is this for Rosh Hashanah?” you ask, taking the smell in deeply.

“Of course! I always prepare well in advance. Can’t be too careful. You’ll find some pumpkin challah over there in that other bowl if you want to smell that,” Bubbe laughs, gesturing. You eagerly pull off the towel for that one, smelling it and feeling your face burst into a wide smile.

“And to answer your other question, yes I do play the shofar, and I volunteered to be on the shofar choir this year,” Bubbe pauses, “Plus, well, I like to blow it every morning of Elul anyway.”

“Elul?” you ask, eager to get away from the actual topic you are here to discuss.

“Oh zeisele, surely you know that one by now?”

“No,” you admit, frowning.

“Sorry for being surprised, I’m happy to tell you, come stand by me,” Bubbe laughs, gesturing you forward. You scurry over to her and stand with her against the kitchen counter as she pulls up the large horn, weighing it in her hand.

“You see, the month before the High Holy Days,” Bubbe says, twirling it around and looking at you with a smile, “We’re supposed to really look at ourselves and how we’ve behaved. How we *want* to behave in the future. What we want the new year to look like, and who we want to be. We also think about how we can be better Jews, and how we can treat the people around us better.”

You nod, listening intently.

“To call everyone to teshuvah – basically all of that trying to better yourself, to return to HaShem – every morning except Shabbos we blow the Shofar, to call everyone home,” Bubbe continues, “And so I like to blow it, even when I don’t go to the minyan.”

“Well, you practically have a minyan in your house,” you point out.

Bubbe laughs, “I suppose I have more than the average person does in their home all the time, yes.”

“Plus, when Joyce and Will are over that’s two more.”

“Heavens! I could start my own rebel synagogue. So, finally, the town can have that synagogue that they don’t go to, and the one they *do* go to.”

You laugh, though you don’t *quite* get it.

Bubbe pulls up the shofar to her lips, pressing her lips together and blowing lightly. A beautiful sound comes out from the horn, if loud – it reverberates throughout the kitchen and makes you smile.

“Do you want to try?”

You look at her in shock.

“I... uh...”

“You can, if you want to. But you don’t have to.”

You think for a minute, before nodding. She hands you the horn, wiping off the mouth piece for you before doing so.

“So you make sure your lips are dry – as dry as they can be.”

You suck in all your saliva, to the point of your lips feeling like they’re parched. You smile at Bubbe, and she smiles happily back at you.

“Put them together like you’re about to say a word.”

You press your lips together hard, and hold the shofar up to your lips.

“Then, vibrate your lips as much as you can, kind of like you’re blowing a dry raspberry. Don’t blow too hard though! You don’t need to put that much work into it.”

You blow, vibrating your lips, and... it makes a bunch of weird spluttering noises.

“Ah! So close!” Bubbe cheers.

“Really?” you ask, frowning at the instrument, skeptical.

“Of course! No one gets it right the first try. You just have to keep practicing.”

You nod, studying the shofar quietly.

“Jane?”

You look back up at Bubbe.

“I am assuming you didn’t just come over here to talk teshuvah and shofars.”

You shake your head silently, feeling your blush creep up your cheeks.

“Do you want to tell me what you want to talk about?”

You sigh heavily.

“I’m... nervous.”

“Well, take your time. But you don’t have to be nervous around me,” Bubbe reassures.

“I know,” you agree, “I guess this is... um... just general nervousness.”

“Oh, I know that feeling.”

You laugh out loud.

“But I’m happy to talk to you, whatever it’s about,” Bubbe affirms, holding onto your shoulder lovingly.

You take a deep breath again, shuffling your feet around nervously against the tiled floor. You feel the sun dripping into the kitchen, not quite warm enough for early September.

“I... um... am I allowed to... uh...”

Bubbe wraps her arm around your shoulder, making you feel warm and safe.

“Are you allowed to what, zeisele?”

“Can I be honest with you? Without you... you know... talking about it to everyone?”

“Absolutely.”

You breathe a sigh of relief.

“Okay. Um. So you know things are... scary. Right now. Blood everywhere, cold weather, us psychics not knowing... what’s going on,” you finish, grimacing a little.

“I do indeed. It’s put us all on edge, I believe.”

You nod rapidly in agreement, “It has, yeah.”

“Do you need help? Trying to calm down? Stay focused?”

“I mean, maybe, but that’s not... really... why I’m here,” you admit, blushing more.

Bubbe studies you for a minute.

“Is this about you and Mike?”

You frown and nod.

“Um... yeah.”

Bubbe watches you for another minute, before saying, “Well, go on.”

“Um... okay,” you take a deep breath, “Um. Mike and I have been thinking. About. Sex.”

It feels like you’re pulling every word from your mouth like taffy stuck to your teeth.

“Understandable.”

You let out a little bit of the breath you’ve been holding.

“And... we don’t... want... to rush into anything.”

“Obviously.”

Bubbe’s still looking at you extremely kindly, and it’s making you slowly and steadily relax as you talk.

“But, like, how can we *not* rush? With everything going on? It’s all so scary. And we’ve... um... we have been... er... experimenting. A little. With stuff. As part of me healing. Just a little bit. So I’m, you know, better than I was a year ago.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“So we’re scared, and we don’t know what’s going to happen next, or *when* it’s going to happen, and we don’t want to, well, not experience this, before things go down, when *anything* could happen to us,” you ramble, unable to really stop yourself now, the words tumbling out of your mouth like rocks down a rock slide.

“You’re right, anything could happen.”

“I guess, then, I was... looking... for... advice?” you ask nervously, hoping Bubbe will have more to say than short responses.

Bubbe frowns, studying you for a long minute.

“So you came to me?”

You nod quickly, “And Mike’s going to talk to Zayde.”

“Hmm.”

You suddenly feel nervous again, everything seizing up with awkwardness and embarrassment inside you –

“Well, I agree with your motivations, of course. Life is scary, you never know what’s around the corner, and right now things feel particularly dire. And this is, of course, something you would both be curious about, just naturally, but also because of how close you are already, how *intimate* you’ve been already, and just... how your pasts have gone,” Bubbe says.

“Yeah,” you mumble.

“And honestly, as far as intimacy and *trust* goes, I see no difference in level thereof between this and wandering about each others’ heads.”

You laugh weakly.

“Fair enough.”

“But the physical intimacy can be overwhelming at the best of times, zeisele, and then with your history... well... you really have to think about this,” Bubbe says.

“I *have* been thinking about it, though!” you groan, “I’ve been thinking about it almost *non-stop!*”

“Oh, I believe it.”

“And honestly it’s driving me a little crazy. Like, it gets less and less triggering the more I think about it, I think –“

“That’s good!”

“But I just. I don’t know. I want to make a decision and be happy with it. And I want to be safe, and ready, and –“

“These are good things to be thinking about, Jane.”

“And, I mean, I’m really curious. I’m *really* curious,” you groan, holding your hands over your face.

“Well, honestly, Jane, you are quite young.”

You frown at her, “I’m sixteen.”

“Yes –“

“That’s how old Nancy was.”

“Did I say Nancy wasn’t quite young?”

You frown more.

“But you’ve gone through a lot. And this is a very... stressful... situation we’re all in. I’m not blaming your motivations at all, and I’d

agree with a lot of them.”

“So... what’s your advice?”

“Well, first of all, getting on birth control, if you’re serious enough about it.”

You nod.

“And getting tested. Given... your past.”

You grimace, feeling yourself clam up.

You take a deep breath.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

“You don’t know if you’re not carrying anything, zeisele. I’m sorry for saying it.”

“I know. I know. I know,” you whisper, trying to get your thoughts under control.

“But those are just practical considerations. I guess, the bigger question – whether you should at all –“

You nod, focusing on those words, staying in the moment.

Stay.

In.

The.

Moment.

“Well, think about teshuvah, Jane.”

You snap back into the moment, for keeps this time.

“Teshuvah?”

“Who do you want to be?”

You frown.

“I... don’t know.”

“Do you want to be the kind of person who has this sort of intimacy with someone else? Who shows all of herself to another person, warts and all? When you’re this young, and this scared?”

You frown, “I’m not sure.”

“But, on the other hand – do you want to be the kind of person who lets fear, and other people, dictate what she wants?”

You frown more, “I don’t think so.”

“What it comes down to is that I am uncomfortable with the idea. Any adult would be. Your father, your step-mother, Mike’s mother, me, Zayde. Any adult is going to have an immediate, visceral reaction to the idea. Just in general, but then on top of it, given your past.”

You nod.

“But this isn’t *about* us. It’s about *you*, and what *you* want.”

“Yeah... I guess it is,” you say, frowning.

“So, it’s about whether or not *you* feel as though *you’re* ready. And, of course, if Mike feels the same.”

You frown more, deep in thought.

“For the record, Jane?”

You look up at her.

“I think you and Mike are clearly mature enough to handle what it entails. I do.”

You smile a little.

"But being mature enough and ready enough are two different things. And I can't answer that question for you – only you can."

You sigh.

"This... is not exactly what I was hoping would happen with this conversation."

"What, you were hoping for me to say 'have fun!' and hand you some condoms?" Bubbe laughs. You laugh with her, blushing more again.

"No, I wasn't. I... I guess I was just hoping for you to reassure me? That I can't make a wrong decision?"

"Hmm," Bubbe pauses, "You *can* make a wrong decision, Jane. I'm sorry, but you can."

You sigh heavily.

"But... well, I don't think you'll regret it too heavily either way."

"You don't?"

"You and Mike have a loving, understanding, intimate relationship. You can get through it if it goes wrong. And you are both strong survivors, with years ahead of you, God willing. So I think you'll have more shots at this in the future."

You beam at her.

"You really do?"

"Oh, heavens, yes. I agree we're all at risk, and that we can't count on it, but I think if anyone can survive this quagmire, it's you two."

You smile and throw your arms around Bubbe, hugging her tightly. She hugs you back, rubbing your shoulder lovingly.

"Now, practical considerations... do you want me to help you?" Bubbe asks.

You breathe with relief, "Oh yes, yes *please*."

“I can’t imagine Jim would be adequate at this sort of parenting task —“

“You have *no idea*.”

“Then let’s go to the doctor. I’ll get you set up and we’ll have you tested. Just tell me what you need from me for your mental health, alright?”

You nod rapidly, following Bubbe out of the house, the smell of apples still filling your nose.

S E P T E M B E R 2 4 1 9 8 7

M I K E L E V I N S O N

You and Zayde sit together on the river, watching it float by, the water gently moving down the stream. You can see the occasional fish swimming around under the surface, some even reaching up and eating the bread crumbs left by the Jewish people gathered there.

You’ve taken Zayde to a corner, away from everyone else, your Mom and Bubbe too busy talking to Holly to notice that you’ve disappeared.

“I get the sense you want to talk to me about something, Mikha’el?” Zayde asks quietly after a while.

You nod, frowning.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Bubbe mentioned something like this might be coming up.”

You sigh heavily, “Yeah. It’s... awkward.”

“Life’s awkward, zeisele.”

You laugh.

“I guess it is, yeah.”

“Well, we won’t be out here long. But it’s a nice place to think, isn’t

it?”

You nod in agreement, watching the water and letting the breeze between the trees calm you. It's a little too cold outside, too cold for late September, so cold you would probably guess November. Though, of course, it could just be weirdly cold.

Or everything could be going to shit.

One of the two.

You sigh.

“Mike?”

“Sorry, Zayde.”

“What are you thinking about?”

You look at him, frowning more, “How cold it is.”

“It is cold, yes.”

“Too cold.”

“Indeed.”

You sigh, “I guess that's what I wanted to talk about.”

“How cold it is?”

“Not just that... I mean... more... how we think everything's going to implode again.”

“Yes, we do think that. I can feel it in the air.”

You look at him for a while, “You... can?”

He swallows, frowning, “Weirdly enough, it... feels. Like last time.”

You gulp.

“I... I believe it.”

"It's in your bones, same as mine, zeisele."

You sigh, "Then how can I trust my instincts?"

"What do you mean?"

"If my bones are telling me I'm about to get thrown into a concentration-camp's-worth of crap, then how can I trust what my instincts are saying? *Especially* when I'm a stupid teenager on top of it?"

"You're going to need to slow down for a bit, zeisele, I'm lost."

You sigh, "Sorry Zayde."

"Nothing to be sorry about. Just start over."

You watch the river, reaching out with your hand to let the water flow through your fingers. The breeze tosses up your hair, and tickles the small hairs on your chin that you missed in the morning. The sun, so often lost behind clouds lately, touches your face, just a little bit, through the trees.

You take another deep breath.

"Everything is... scary."

"Indeed."

You sigh, "And... *because* everything is scary... Jane and I have been... thinking about having sex."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. How can I help?" Zayde asks.

"You're not going to... tell us not to?" you ask back, frowning.

“No, zeisele, I’m not.”

“Why... not?”

“Because you’re teenagers, and if there’s one thing you can’t do, it’s tell teenagers what to do.”

You laugh weakly.

“But... if you *could* tell us what to do...”

Zayde sighs, wrapping his arm around your shoulder and staring out ahead of him, watching the animals scurry about in between the trees.

“I’m not sure I’d want to tell you.”

“You... aren’t?”

“No, I’m not. Because you two are smart, mature kids. Smart, mature kids with a very intimate relationship already.”

“But...”

“But you’re also still kids. Very young kids. Very young kids that have been hurt far too much already.”

You nod.

“And I just don’t want to see you both getting hurt again.”

You sigh.

“But you understand why we want to?”

“Of course I do. I was sixteen once. Granted, I was just out of the camps...”

You grimace.

“But I remember feeling like the world could end any second, and like safety was never guaranteed. And it was around that age. So I know the feeling. Even though I *wasn’t* in any immediate danger...

you don't... leave the camps without feeling like that."

"No, you don't," you whisper.

You both sit in silence for a long while again, just watching the river.

"So you're in an interesting situation. Do you play it safe? Or do you take a risk, because you can't afford to?" Zayde pauses, "It's a big risk, but it's also a big risk to not."

"Yup," you sigh.

"I don't think I can give you the answer you're looking for, zeisele. I'm not you. I'm not Jane. I'm just an old man who's seen the world around him hurt too many people he loves."

You reach over and hug him tightly, squeezing for dear life.

"And I don't want you to get hurt, if you can help it," Zayde whispers against the top of your head.

"How can I make sure we don't get hurt?" you ask softly.

"Well... I'd say you are both very good at listening to each other," Zayde says. You nod in affirmation.

"I think, as long as you both keep listening to each other, and being honest and open with what you want and what you're comfortable with, you're much less likely to hurt each other," Zayde continues, "Even if it's embarrassing to say so in the moment."

"Yeah," you sigh, "That makes sense."

You watch the river float by.

"The real question is, Mike," Zayde continues, "Are you and Jane ready to let everything go? Are you ready to cast your pain, your suffering – is *she* ready to cast it – into the river?"

You take a crumb of bread out of your pocket, gently tossing it into the water. You watch it float away, after all the others.

"I think I'm ready. But I'm not the question, am I?" you ask softly.

"No, you're not," Zayde agrees, "And if she's not ready, no amount of communication will make it go well, will make it not a mistake."

"So it comes back to her," you conclude.

"It does. Are you okay with that?"

"I'm always okay with that," you say, "I would never *dream* of hurting her. She's the one that brought this up."

"She's afraid. You're afraid. But you're afraid of different things," Zayde pauses, "She's afraid of not moving forward – of being stuck – and dying that way."

You wait, watching him as he thinks for a moment.

"You're afraid of becoming what you hate the most."

You let out a long sigh.

"But I don't think she's stuck. And I don't think you're becoming evil. So..."

"So?"

"So if you take that all away... why do you want to? Or, in your case, don't want to?"

You sigh again.

"I... want to. I think."

"Why?"

"Because... if we die... I want no regrets. No 'what-ifs.' If she – we – decide we aren't ready, we can stop. But I don't want to let fear make me be old, alone, and... wistful," you whisper.

"Then you know your own answer."

You look at him, and he hugs you again, comforting the swirling in

your chest.

It will be okay.

OCTOBER 16 1987

JANE HOPPER

“Of all the dates to take me to, a bunch of people dancing with the Torah is one of the more unorthodox ones you’ve done,” you joke, laughing as Mike holds your hand and you walk out of the synagogue. He laughs, kissing you on your forehead.

“I don’t know, it’s the start of something new, you know? New Torah cycle, end of the New Year celebrations. Everything’s starting over again,” Mike says, leading you along as you walk down the streets together.

“Everything?” you ask quietly.

“Everything,” Mike agrees, looking back at you. You shiver as the cold air blows through you.

“Can... I start over?” you continue, walking up to him and facing him, standing as close to him as you can. He breathes in sharply.

“Do you want to?” he asks seriously, “Really, Jane?”

“I do,” you pause, looking up into his brown eyes and finding yourself lost in them, “I really do, Mike.”

“Okay,” he agrees, leaning in and kissing you, “Then let’s start over.”

“Let’s?”

“I think we both need to, a little bit. I have been so... so... overwhelmed. By everything that’s happened to us *both*. And you have too, but you of course are more personal –“

“*Mike.*”

Mike looks at you in surprise.

“You’ve been in my head. I’ve been in yours.”

He gulps a little bit.

“Everything is personal to *both* of us.”

He laughs, pressing his nose and forehead against yours.

“I guess you’re right.”

“So if you want to try, then *I* want to try.”

“You want to start over? Really, Jane?”

You nod again.

“I think starting over would be good. You know that... the Mind Flayer... whatever of it is left in this world... wants us to be weak. To be out of sync. To freak out, and then freak out in response to the other freaking out. To lose control,” you take a deep breath, “To lose control of ourselves and, together, break apart the world.”

“Okay...”

“We can’t let that happen. We need to be *in* sync. We need to support each other, and start trying to move on. As a team.”

“I agree.”

“So even if we decide... we aren’t ready. Even if we go somewhere, and intend to have sex, and then decide we don’t want to...”

“It’s the thought that counts?”

“Exactly.”

He laughs, kissing you on the forehead.

“You really think even trying would be a step forward?”

“Well, it certainly wouldn’t be a step back,” you counter. He frowns at you, thoughtful.

"It's up to you, Jane. It's always up to you. I know you... think it should also be up to me. And it is. I'm not, you know, reluctant. At all."

You snort.

"But, I don't want to hurt you. Please, please, don't let me hurt you."

"You could never hurt me, Mike," you whisper, leaning in and kissing him on the cheek.

He smiles at you, reaching to squeeze your hand again.

"So... starting over? Tonight?"

"Starting over."

And you walk off together, laughing every step of the way.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm just going to leave my "long apologetic oh gd I'm sorry for disappearing" author's note for the next chapter, because there was no way in hell I was dropping this without something else to ease the awkwardness.

The only things I'll ask:

- 1) Don't kill me
- 2) Yes, I left it vague, on purpose. No, I won't answer any questions. It's up to you, the reader, to decide what happened. It's not important, ultimately, to me.
- 3) Yes, I absolutely call out my own uncomfortableness at writing this chapter like, ten times within it, bc that's one of the primary reasons this took so Gd-damned long
- 4) PLEASE comment on both THIS and the next one!!!! Thank you!!!!

39. Determination

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for vague references to past trauma and weather-related peril

OCTOBER 29 1987

MIKE LEVINSON

It is the seventh day that it hasn't stopped snowing.

The power is out, the phone lines are out, and it's absolutely completely white outside.

So you and your family are shivering near the fireplace, the wood Bubbe chopped down for the aesthetic sort of fire working to keep you all warm. Holly is surrounded in your Mom's embrace, held onto tightly by her. Bubbe, Zayde, and you huddle near them, all as close as you can be.

"I wonder when the power will come back on," Bubbe sighs after a while.

"Probably not until the snow stops. We weren't ready for the winter because it's *been* freezing the entire *year* and the town has run out of supplies," Mom snaps, looking furious.

"What are we going to do?" you ask, so nervous you can't stop shaking. Mom sighs.

"I don't know, sweetheart, but maybe someone should try to get more wood soon. And we're running low on food..."

"How low?"

"Low enough."

Holly cries loudly into your Mom's chest and you hold your face in your hands, sighing heavily. Zayde wraps his arm around your

shoulder and rubs it comfortingly.

“It’ll pass, zeisele, these things always do.”

You swallow and look back out at the snow falling.

“They don’t, though. They don’t always.”

You get up, putting on another sweater as you wander through the house, shivering the moment you move away from the family and the fire. They don’t call you back, though – they know better than to do so.

Staring out into the snow and the wind, you find your mind –

Flitting –

Back and forth –

You cry out and hold your head in your hands, falling to the cold ground of the room.

You see darkness.

Overtaking everything.

Creeping up and into you –

Into your family –

Into Jane –

Into your friends –

Into everyone –

Filling everyone up, everywhere, until they can’t feel anything else –

Just cold and dark –

You gasp for air and come back, looking around the room while blood trickles down out of your nostril.

“Too much,” you gasp out, holding onto the ground, “Too... much...”

You shiver again and take in a deep breath, holding your head in your hands and trying to center yourself.

You think about everything else.

You think about the feeling of crisp leaves beneath your feet as you walk through a normal autumn day.

You think about the feeling of Jane’s cheek under your hand as you hold her close to you.

You think about Lucas’ laugh as you play DnD, Will and Dustin chuckling too.

You think about your sisters and you making challah together.

You think about your Mom, Bubbe, and Zayde all holding you and comforting you.

You take a deep breath, again, and stand up, again, looking back out at the snow.

Weird visions were coming multiple times a day, now. Much too many multiple times a day.

“Mom?” you say, walking back into the Living Room. Mom and Holly, however, are covered with a blanket, sleeping soundly together next to the hearth. Bubbe and Zayde are talking quietly, their heads pressed together as they shiver in time.

“Zeisele? What is it? Where did you go?” Bubbe asks worriedly, looking up and walking over to you. A blanket is wrapped tightly around her shoulders, and she’s wearing three of her winter tichels all stacked on top of each other. She rushes to you and holds you tightly against her, warming you up, though you don’t have enough warmth of your own.

“Bubbe, please, go back to the fire –“

“Come with me, then. You shouldn’t wander off. Warmth is at a

premium –“

“I know, but –“

“Mikha’el, what are you thinking?” Zayde asks seriously.

You look over at him and swallow.

“I have to see if Jane is okay.”

“Then talk to her in your mind, Mike –“

“I can’t *reach* her!” you shout, unable to control yourself.

You strain again, against the boundaries of your mind.

Nothing moves.

Nothing budges.

“I *can’t!*” you cry again, too distressed to really say anything more. Zayde stands up and hugs you too, the three of you holding on to each other while you start to sob.

“I can’t reach her, I can’t reach her, I can’t reach her –“

“Have you been able to before?” Bubbe asks softly.

“Most of the time. We’ve... been in and out of each other’s minds too much to *not*. It’s... stronger than the other links.”

“Makes sense,” Zayde agrees.

“But... I can’t...”

“You can’t reach her now?”

You shake your head, pacing around the room and wringing your wrists.

It’s weird.

It’s too weird.

It's too weird not being connected to her.

You need...

You need to reach her.

You need to reach her *now*.

You need to see she's... okay...

You need to.

Now.

"I need to go."

"Mike –"

"No, Bubbe, I need to go. I need to make sure I can find her. I don't... I can't... she can't be scared out there. What if she's alone? What if she's hurt?" you're rambling now, and you can't stop yourself, "It's been a whole *week*. An entire week. The power is out and the phones are out and who knows if Hopper's with her or Mrs. Byers and Will and... and... I need to make sure she's okay. I need to make sure she's *okay*."

"I know, Mike, but –"

"I don't want you out there in this. It's not safe. It's not safe for anyone, and with us needing to try and preserve your mental state right now –"

"Don't you get it?" you shout over your grandparents, unable to stop yourself, "If I don't know she's okay, my mental state is already gone. It's already gone. It's gone *now*. Please."

You take a deep breath, tears falling out of your eyes.

"Let me go."

"Mike..." Zayde is crying, holding onto your arm. Bubbe is silent, watching you with determination on her face.

"Let me go," you repeat.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Zayde shouts, looking at Bubbe, "Okay?"

"Okay," Bubbe says again, "Look, he's right, David. He's right. We have to let him go out there."

Zayde sighs.

"Do you know what your plan is?"

"I'm going to walk to their house. They're at the Byers' now, or they should be, so it's not that far of a walk," you look outside at the snow and shiver preemptively, "I'll put on... as much as I can."

"But..."

"David, we're letting him go. He's right. And he can make it."

You look over at Bubbe, who looks back at you.

"You're a survivor, zeisele. You can make it."

You nod determinedly, hugging Bubbe and kissing her cheek, hugging Zayde and kissing his cheek. You reach over for Mom and Holly, kissing both of them on their heads before walking over to your room.

Far away from the fire, you can barely feel your fingers, but you grab every bit of warm clothing you own and put it on as fast as you can. You cover your head with scarves and your legs with pants and your torso with as much as you can fit, but still move around in.

"Okay," you whisper, looking out into the snow again.

"Okay, Jane. I'm coming."

You step out the front door, the snow already going up to your knee. You groan, quietly, as the cold already fills your body to the bone.

But it's humid, and wet, and the mere *fact* that snow is falling means

its not unbearable yet.

You can do this.

You keep walking, holding your arms tightly around yourself, leaning your head down and forward to push through the winds and the snow. You keep walking, as much as you can, remembering what you know about huge snow storms – big steps, slow steps, walk gently, keep going, take rests.

Big Steps.

Slow Steps.

Walk Gently.

Take Rests.

Keep.

Going.

You wish you had handled this differently.

You wish you had talked to Jane before it got *really* bad.

You wish you had all congregated in the same house to wait it out, rather than split up, split the party, act like this could *possibly* be a normal late-October storm.

It'll pass, Hopper had said.

We'll regroup after, Renee had said.

We should try to minimize travel, Dustin had said.

And now here you are.

Wading through snow that goes up to your stomach.

You groan loudly, grit your teeth, and keep pushing through.

Keep.

Pushing.

You have to keep going.

You can't afford to stop.

You can't.

You really, really can't.

Go, Mike.

Go.

Keep walking.

Reach Jane.

Make it.

Get there.

Reach her.

Check her.

Make sure she's okay.

Too much snow.

Too much wind.

Too much cold.

No sun.

Just clouds.

Just blizzard.

You cry out in pain and huddle against a tree, curling around yourself, letting the tree block the wind.

Come on, Mike.

You can't stay in one place too long. You'll get sleepy and tired, and fall asleep in the snow, and probably *die*.

And you don't want to die.

Not anymore.

You grit your teeth and wrap your scarves tighter around your head.

Go.

Go.

Go.

Go.

Go.

You can do it.

You can do it.

You can reach her.

You can reach her.

Come on, Mike.

Keep walking, Mike.

Wait.

You look around you, noticing only trees and snow, endless trees and snow, everywhere around you. You take a deep breath and try to get your bearings.

But, the obvious can't escape your notice.

You are, very, extremely, *ridiculously*, **lost**.

You groan quietly and walk over to a tree, climbing it despite the relative limited mobility you're experiencing, just grabbing onto branches and going up as high as you can.

You have to try and at least *see* something around you... right?

You have to try and figure out where you are... right?

Unfortunately, all of the snow has already covered up your footprints, so going back the way you came isn't much of a decent option. You feel your stomach clench at the thought and continue to climb upward, breathing sharply as twigs manage to dig into your side. Leaves are still on the trees – some of them, anyway – unprepared for the storm and the cold and, thus, not yet fallen off of the branches.

Halloween hasn't even happened yet.

You've barely finished the Tishrei holiday chaotic extravaganza.

You grit your teeth again and manage to reach the top of the tree, panting with the effort as you stare around the area. You continue to just see blizzard and white and snow everywhere, but you can make out the treeline. You can see, at least, where it breaks, where buildings are visible.

If you have buildings to guide you, you can try and find the Byers' house.

You take a minute to study the scene, trying to imprint it on your brain, regretting leaving, regretting abandoning your family, when they need you so much, when you need *them* so much.

But you also need Jane.

And Jane also needs you.

You shimmy down slowly, continuing to walk through the snow, wishing, *begging*, for it to stop, just for a *second*.

You just want to not be cold for one freaking *second*.

You just want the power to come back on. For the telephones to work

again. For the streets to be cleared of snow and ice. For the snow to start to melt. For everything to go back to normal.

When the snow first appeared, everyone thought it would go away. After all, freak snowstorms happen sometimes, and it *had* been an *abnormally* cold winter. Sure, you and the party were all thinking that it could be a symptom of something else, but honestly? How could the Mind Flayer *possibly* be in your world enough to do something like *this*? And the weather stations were reporting various movements of wind and water, currents and clouds, all the different things that cause weather to happen, and apparently it was predictable, it was expected.

You just wish you knew what the world was thinking about the snow storm, because apparently it was supposed to storm all over.

In hindsight, you should have realized that the extensive nature of the storm was the reason it *wasn't a normal storm*.

Every step you take is absolute agony at this point, with your thighs burning as you trudge through the snow, and your face so frozen you stopped feeling your nose ages ago. Hours ago? Minutes? You've lost all track of time, which makes no sense, because you are the *psychic of time*.

Time is literally *your thing*.

"I need more time," you grunt to yourself, breathing heavily and collapsing on the snow with exhaustion, "More time... more time... more time..."

But your powers are on the fritz.

How do your powers work again?

Do you even have the *energy* you'd need to make your powers work again?

Since you can't even pick your body up off of the *ground*?

There is one benefit to this, of course – the fact that the snow is, at least, mildly insulating, and you're starting to feel a little warmer as

you are buried under increasing levels of snow falling all around you.

Okay, the amount of water in the world is finite... right?

Eventually this had to stop...

Right?

You pull yourself up out of the snow and force yourself to keep walking, heading towards you had seen the main town in the trees, even though that's off the path to the Byers house, because you *really needed* to know where you were going. Maybe steal some supplies from a shop. Not like anyone would care, now, when everything was sent into some sort of weird apocalyptic snow mayhem.

Got to get to Jane.

Got to get to Jane.

Got to get to Jane.

Got to get to Jane.

You finally see a building in the distance – just the post office, but good enough for you. You quicken your steps, running up to it and digging around the snow that surrounded the door. The door is locked, but you ram your body into it, managing to open it and squeeze your way through. The office is completely empty, clerk stations left strewn with postage and envelopes and papers and pens, like a normal day of work had ended and everyone expected to come back the next.

The heating is off, of course, probably because the gas lines got shut off too, and you make your way through the only *slightly* warmer office, moving through the building that is at least snow-free compared to the outside. No one else appears to be in it, and you don't really care about propriety anymore, or rules, or legality, or whatever other fucking thing would keep you from walking right through the storerooms of the building. You hop over the counter and keep moving amongst the boxes and stacks of mail, probably waiting to be delivered and never sent out.

Everything gives you a different sort of chill than the one you'd gotten used to.

It had all been so *normal*, too. The days leading up to the storm had just been a little colder than usual for that time of year, but otherwise completely usual. Dustin was planning a Halloween party. You and Jane were going to go for a bike ride. Lucas had gotten letters from Max and she seemed to be doing well. Will was going to put on another art show in the library. Schoolwork was tough, but you were getting through it.

It had all been so, so, so freaking *normal*.

And then it just, wouldn't, stop, snowing.

Why wouldn't it stop snowing?

You make it to the post office's back door, forcing open the door and tumbling out into the snow. The Byers' house is kind of around the other way, but you know you can loop through more and more buildings to get there.

So you keep going.

You force open the door to the grocery store, walking through the aisle of rotting food and perishing perishables. The smell is so overwhelming you can't help but gag, but at least your stomach is so empty that you can't really vomit anything back up in response to the overwhelming odor. You find your way to the hardware section and grab a flashlight, stuffing it with batteries and turning it on.

This would be helpful as it starts to get dark.

You nod in determination and force some granola into your mouth, drinking water from the stands, and then walk out back into the snow. You turn around and walk back a little, going into another building – the library.

People are actually huddled up in this building, probably because it wasn't locked like the stores had been (or, worse, filled with the smell of rotten meat).

“Wait, you’re the Levinsons’ grandson, aren’t you?” one man asks upon seeing you, everyone else huddled in the library murmuring and gasping in recognition upon your entrance.

“Yeah, I am,” you whisper, shivering, “I’m... trying to get to my friends’ house.”

“Go back, kid, or stay here. It isn’t safe,” the librarian whispers, huddled in a ratty blanket.

“I know it isn’t, but I have to,” you explain, “Can I cut through the back of the library?”

The library nods and helps lead you through the people, out to a fire exit that you push open together. You keep going, lighting up the darkening world with your flashlight, now making a beeline down the street you know leads towards the Byers house.

It will still be hard to find your way, but maybe you can do it now.

You keep making your way through the snow, wishing you could contact your family and tell them you’re okay, but you know you can’t, you know you have no way of talking to them, so you just keep forcing yourself through the increasingly high snow.

You can’t afford to take a break to sleep, or rest, or even just drink the snow. Not anymore. You have to keep going. You have to reach the house.

Hopefully Jane will actually be *inside* the house.

The trees are going thick again, but you know the road to the Byers’ like the back of your hand at this point, and it feels at least *somewhat* familiar. Whatever internal compass you still have from being a caveman that had to find his own way in the world, once upon a time, is working. Perhaps this was how they got through the ice age. You have no idea.

You just need to keep walking.

Jane. Jane. Jane.

You think her name over and over again, hoping that maybe she'll pick up the psychic phone, as it were, and help you find her.

Help you find each other.

Everything is so dire. How did it end up like this?

How did it end up like?

Where did the snow *even come from*?

Everything feels like you just got dropped into the snowstorm, like no time had passed, as though you blinked the week before out of existence, and you blinked the week of snow into existence.

How?

How could the Mind Flayer even be *doing* this?

The snow hits your face like daggers at this point, every single nerve ending in your body *screaming* for you to stay somewhere *warm*. You feel as though your hair is just *drenched*, even though its buried between layers of hats, because you can't *really* cover up every curl. Your fingers can barely move now, your legs can barely wade through the snow. Your heart is going much, much, *much* too fast, and you just need to *sleep*.

But if you sleep out here, you might never wake up again.

Jane.

Jane.

Jane.

Jane.

Please hear me, Jane.

Please hear me.

Please.

Jane.

Jane, please.

Jane.

You scream with anger, punching a tree on your route, falling into the snow and crying loudly.

The Mind Flayer *shouldn't be strong enough to cause an entire snowstorm the likes of which has not been seen since the last glacial maximum* AND destroy all of the powers of you and your friends? **HOW? WE DESTROYED HIM LAST YEAR?**

Your mind is essentially breaking, because you can't comprehend how this is possible.

How could the Mind Flayer have enough of himself to do this?

You blew up an entire fucking *car* for God's sake.

The snow begins to envelope you, and you just cry into your hands, too exhausted to keep walking, even though you need to, have to, *should*, to get to Jane.

Jane.

Jane.

Jane.

Jane.

Gotta get to Jane.

You take a deep breath, pull yourself out of the snow, square your shoulders, hold your flashlight aloft, and keep forcing yourself through.

One foot.

Other foot.

One foot.

Other foot.

One foot.

Other foot.

One foot.

Other foot.

Keep walking.

Keep walking.

Keep walking.

Keep walking.

Keep walking.

Everything is far, far, far too white, but you manage to make yourself reach a clearing. It doesn't look quite like the Byers' house, but what else could it be?

Unless you're really lost.

You groan and force yourself up the hill, hoping that the snow covered blur in the near distance is the house.

"JANE?" you scream, just, hoping, hoping that she'll hear you.

"JANE. JANE, IT'S ME. JANE. JANE. JANE."

You keep crawling forward, forcing yourself up the hill, the trees creaking and cracking with the force of the wind blowing through them, and you can't feel anything anymore, and you don't even know how you're *moving* anymore, but you have to keep going, you have to keep going, you have to keep going, you have to keep going –

The snow overtakes you, as you find yourself unable to keep your eyes open any longer.

You wake up near a fire, and are surprised you've woken up at all.

"Mike? *Mike?*"

You look up and see Jane looking down at you desperately, reaching out for your face and holding onto you, tears streaming out of her eyes. You're next to a roaring fire, and you can see Chester and Eddie huddled up in a bed of blankets next to Jane.

"Jane?" you whisper, your voice barely a croak, so soft you're worried she doesn't hear you.

"Mike!" she gasps, reaching over and kissing you so deeply you can't help but squeak.

"Jane! Where – how –"

"I... felt something was wrong," she whispers, "More than usual. I could feel it in my stomach. And I had to find you. I had to find you."

She starts sobbing horrifically, and Eddie and Chester run over to her, cuddling into her arms as she cries with them.

"Jane?" you whisper, "Jane?"

"I'm – sorry – I'm sorry – I'm –" she sniffles more, holding her face in her hands and breathing in deeply, "I'm sorry, you were just, you were passed out, and, and, and..."

"I'm sorry, Jane," you gasp out, reaching for her and holding her tightly, "Oh Jane, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to reach you, but, I was worried, I was *so worried*."

"I'm glad you came," Jane stammers out, wiping her face off and her tears staining her hands, "I'm glad, I'm glad, I'm glad I promise, I just, I was so scared, so scared, so –"

You reach in and kiss her as hard as you can, holding her tightly to you, just waiting for a minute for you both to breathe in and compose yourselves. You have to calm down. You *really have* to calm down. She squeaks, and hugs you tightly, holding on for dear life. It makes you sigh with relief.

"I've been so alone," she whispers, "And so scared. I have to keep them warm, but not let them get hurt by the fire..."

You look at Chester and Eddie, who are huddled between you both, as puffy as you've ever seen them.

"They seem to be okay..." you murmur.

"I know," Jane sighs, "And I'm glad. But it's been hard to keep them safe. And then I'm alone on top of it –"

"Jane, why are you alone?" you ask, reaching up for her face, "Where's... Joyce? Will? Hopper?"

Jane breathes in shakily, "Joyce and Will are with are at Steve's, they were going to go collect him rather than have him be alone, and I

didn't see them afterwards. So *hopefully* they're at Steve's, or somewhere else safe. Dad... Dad went out to find them, he promised... he *promised* he'd be right back... but he's not... he's *not*..."

She bursts into sobs, hunched over on herself and holding her legs tightly to her body. You reach your arms around her and hold her tightly to you again, though weak, just holding her together.

"Fuck," you whisper quietly.

"Yup," she laughs weakly, wiping her eyes off, "And I've been so scared and alone and... I just... I wished I could reach out to you... but..."

"Nothing?" you finish.

"Nothing," she agrees.

"Well I'm here now," you reassure, your strength coming back to you the longer you sit in front of the crackling fire and the longer you look into this beautiful girl's eyes, "And I'm not going anywhere."

"What about Bubbe? Zayde? Your mom? Holly?" Jane asks.

"They weren't happy I left, but I had to. I knew I had to find you so we could hold each other together," you murmur, "I'm sorry. I wish I could talk to them and tell them I'm okay..."

"I wish you could too," Jane sighs, "But nothing's working. Not the phones, not the walkies, not the void, nothing."

You kiss her on the forehead and cry against her skin, unable to stop yourself.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

"But... I heard you. Out in the snow. Or I felt you. Or *something*."

Something couldn't get rid of the connection *entirely*," Jane whispers, "You're... too strong. To me."

"You're too strong to me," you murmur back, "I... where did you find me?"

"In the yard. I ran out and grabbed you, and pulled you into the house."

"You did?"

"Well, it helps that I have some psychic powers left."

You laugh weakly.

"I don't seem to."

"Well, you are a *baby* psychic."

"Ouch!"

"It's true though!"

You laugh weakly and hold her in your arms, leaving kisses all over the top of her head. She sighs, resting her cheek against your chest.

"And I just... kept you warm and hoped for the best, I guess."

"Well... what I was going to say is, I don't know, I think I could tell where you were. That was the only *fucking* way I found my way through this storm."

"I believe it."

"It's *impossible* out there."

"Definitely."

"Do you think the whole world is like this?"

"I hope not."

She sighs, holding her face in her hands, "How do we stop it, Mike?"

It's not stopping on its own. It's *not*."

"I don't know," you whisper, "It's not like we control the weather."

"Just time and space," she snorts.

"And not even that, given it's, you know, the great power drought of the century."

Jane sighs again.

"What are we going to do?"

You look at her for a long time, the fire reflecting in her eyes. The birds chirp softly between you, unwilling to leave the warmth of your bodies.

"We should rest up for a little bit. At least. Just a little. And see how we feel after," you say quietly.

"Agreed," Jane murmurs, "Come on guys. Let's nap."

You hold your arms around her and you lie down together, the birds curled up with you, all of you falling asleep and letting the warmth from the fire overcome you. For a minute, you can pretend this is even... normal.

OCTOBER 30 1987

You wake up with your neck too stiff for you to really move it, so you lift yourself up with your hand and curl over, resting your head against your knees. A deep breath courses through your body, which is cold, and achey, and far, far too sore for you to do much at all.

Still, you force yourself up and limp to the window, looking outside. It's still blustering hard, though the sheer *amount* of water seems to be decreasing. Instead it looks...

Dark.

Too dark.

You swallow and turn back around, limping back to Jane. She's sitting up again, rubbing her eyes and looking at you worriedly. The birds chirp with her as she gives them water and food. She meets your eyes, and you breathe in sharply, unable to stop yourself.

Your heart is beating much, much too fast for how weak you are.

"How are you feeling?" she asks quietly, reaching out for your hand. You grab hers, your body shaking with cold and fear.

Too much cold and fear.

"Better," you mumble, "Rested, at least. Comforted that you're okay."

Jane smiles weakly.

"Can you watch the birds? I'll get us some food and water. I don't like to leave them alone, but I don't like to take them away from the fire, either."

"Of course. Do we have enough firewood to keep going? Should I get some at some point?" you ask softly.

"I think we're good for now. My dad is *Hopper*. If anyone's a disaster survivalist..." Jane smirks, "At any rate, not now. You need to build your strength back up."

"I do," you agree, sighing, "I really, really do."

She leaves for a minute as you cuddle and give the birds scritches, trying to keep them warm and happy, and she walks back over to you with cereal and water, the two of you eating quietly and enjoying the feeling of food entering your bellies.

You wish you had food like this at home.

You hope your family is okay...

You can't stop the tears escaping your eyes as you hold your face in your hands, shaking a little. Jane reaches over to hold your shoulder, squeezing it tightly and looking at you in worry. You meet her eyes, your breath stopping in your throat again, and you can't even think.

All you can think about is whether or not your family is okay.

"I'm worried," you whisper quietly.

"Me too," Jane agrees, tears starting to leak out of her eyes as well, "I don't know where Hopper is, or Joyce or Will... at least you probably know where your family is..."

"But they don't know where I am," you murmur, "And now a day has passed."

"It has," Jane nods, looking solemn, "So what do we do? The phones don't work."

You stand up and walk over to the phone, picking it up and sighing when the dial tone doesn't go off. You hang back up and turn back to Jane, the sound of the snow outside filling the silence.

"This is bad," Jane whispers.

"At least it's better that I'm with you, now."

"True..."

She reaches out to you and you hold her hand, taking a deep breath and sighing.

"I just want to know what's going on. Is it only Hawkins? America? The Northern Hemisphere? The whole world?" she asks softly, "But the TV doesn't work, and I can't look at jack shit."

"I think you can," you murmur, reaching out for her face, "We just have to get you in the right mindset."

"If you think I'm going into a bathtub right now –"

"God no. But we should figure out a way to get you in as much of a sensory deprivation mindset as we can."

Jane nods at you, looking determined. You work to seal up the windows more, with stray towels and pillows and anything you don't need to keep yourselves *warm*. You wrap her up in blankets as much

as you can, and she giggles quietly. You put the birds in their cage, keeping it warm with blankets as well, close but not too close to the fire place. You fashion earplugs out of cotton balls, and a blindfold out of a stray t-shirt. She sits in front of you, smiling a little as you wrap the blindfold around her head.

“Do you need the earplugs?”

“Yes,” she murmurs softly, “Nothing else will turn on for us to hear static.”

“That’s what I thought. Okay, this will probably tickle, and you in theory should not hear me after I help you put them in...”

“Where should I look?”

“The... capital? Somewhere away from here. Where important people are, and could be talking to each other.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

You both work together to stuff the cotton balls in her ears, and she rests against you with her eyes closed, breathing in slowly and surely. You hold her, not moving much, wanting to comfort her and keep her warm, but not wanting to disturb her concentration. She rests in your arms and in the blankets surrounding you, breathing in slowly and surely.

A long, tense moment passes.

Another moment.

And another.

The birds chirp near you all, and you hope it’s not distracting her.

You wish you knew what was going on.

You feel her breathe in, and out, in, and out, against you.

You close your eyes, too, and try to connect with her, try to give your energy *to* her.

She has to see something.

She has to see the world, and see what's going on in it.

Has to find out what's happening.

Come on, Jane.

You can do it, Jane.

You can do it.

You can do it.

You can do it.

You almost jump when you hear her speak –

“I'm in the Void.”

“Good!” you gasp, squeezing her arm, “Good. What do you see?”

She swallows, clearly far away.

“I don't know yet.”

“Okay, take your time. You can do this, my love, you can do this.”

She nods, remaining silent for another moment, and then another.

You breathe with her, trying to lend the calmness you've managed to achieve to her.

“I see... men.”

“Which men?”

“Government men. The president. Men with him.”

“Okay, good. You found a good spot.”

Jane nods.

“What do they say?”

She is silent for a while again, and you take care to not follow your instincts – squeezing her arm, touching her shoulder, kissing her head. You don’t want to distract her.

“It’s snowing everywhere.”

“All over the country?”

“No...” she takes a breath, “Everywhere, everywhere.”

“Wait... everywhere?”

“The whole world is snowing.”

“Snowing like *here*?”

“Not like here. Most places – hot places – light snow. Very light snow. Other places heavy snow. But no where like here. Most places have power, telephones.”

“And... here?”

“Here is blacked out. They can’t reach us. No one can get in and out of the town, except on foot.”

You can see streams of blood coming out of her nostrils.

“Okay, you can come out of it now. Breathe. Take care of yourself.”

She gasps and removes the blindfold, pulling out the earplugs, breathing heavily. She wipes off her nose, looking moderately distressed, her eyes meeting yours.

“Jane?”

“Everything is exploding, and we’re at the center.”

You swallow hard, wringing your wrists.

“So what do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

A long pause goes between you both.

“I should try to find Hopper. Or Joyce and Will. Or *someone*.”

“You should,” you agree softly, “But for now you should rest. That has to have taken a lot out of you, and it’s important that we stay as strong as we can right now –“

Jane cries out, doubling over on herself. The birds scream in shock, and you reach for her, shouting her name in distress.

“No! No! No! NO!”

“Jane? Jane, what is it –“

“No no no no no no no no no –“

“Jane! Jane tell me, tell me what’s happening, Jane –“

“No! NO!”

“Jane you’re scaring me, please –“

“NO!”

Another minute passes of her shouting, the birds screaming, you trying to make sense of it in the chaos.

And then she goes silent.

“Jane?” you ask, your voice hoarse, your pulse pounding faster than it has any right to.

Your ears are ringing.

Everything feels like it’s spinning, again.

“I... saw...” she swallows, looking up at you with tears in her eyes.

“You saw...?”

“Papa.”

You veins run cold.

“You *saw* him?”

“I don’t know, it was like, it was like a flash, just a flash, and –“

You squeeze her tightly, refusing to let go for even a second.

“Did you – mean to – see him –“

“No, no I didn’t,” Jane starts sobbing, holding her face in her hands, tears streaming down her face like rivers.

“Jane...”

“I’ve been having... a lot of...”

“Weird visions?” you ask quietly.

She looks up at you rapidly, her long curly hair bouncing around her face.

“Yes...”

“I have too. Scary ones. Terrifying ones.”

“As distressing as they can be?” Jane asks.

“Yup,” you agree.

You watch each other for another long minute.

“It’s the Mind Flayer. It’s him,” Jane whispers, “It has to be.”

“How can the Mind Flayer be causing this whole snowstorm, destroying our powers or fucking with them or whatever, *and* giving us flashes of... bad... stuff?”

“Well, the last two aren’t *that* different.”

“True. But... still...”

“I don’t know,” Jane whimpers, tears falling rapidly out of her eyes,
“What do we do?”

You swallow, looking out at the blizzard.

Too cold.

Too much snow.

Too much fear.

Too much everything.

“We have to get the party back together.”

“The whole party?” she asks quietly.

“The whole party.”

“How do we do that?”

You stand up, looking outside.

“We call them.”

Jane watches you more, frowning.

“And how do we do that?”

You grin a little.

“A fun combination of your powers and fire, Jane.”

“Fire?”

“Fire.”

And you start hauling the wood outside, determination filling your bones once more.

Notes for the Chapter:

HELLO

IT IS I

THE GREAT ABANDONER

in all seriousness I would never abandon this story, I promise. I've just still been taking care of myself and the shit in my life. So

A) I found it very difficult to write the previous chapter for semi-obvious reasons

B) I've been busy with the end of the school year (had to give a seminar which I was dreading because of how hard the year had been and I had no data), teaching (TWO classes this summer. TWO), jewish stuff (some stuff in my life finally finishing up on that regard), and my birthday (I'm born August 4th, my mom is August 9th, my brother is August 13th, and one of my best friends is August 11th. August tends to disappear in a quagmire of festivities, friends, and no free time).

C) Writer's block in general? Like I've been having trouble writing my dinosaur blog

D) I subsist on comments, especially really long, thought out comments, like, liveblogging-esque comments. And both of my liveblogger-esque commenters have been going through a lot of shit and unable to comment. So that's been killing my motivation.

E) Have I mentioned how much I didn't want to write the last chapter

Luckily, the story is now moving on from "awkward teenage crap that's necessary for character development" to "final showdown" which is SO MUCH EASIER TO WRITE and I'm excited!!! Get excited!!! So excited!!!!!!!

Don't worry, I would never kill the pets of the story. Chester and Eddie are going to be okay.

PLEASE COMMENT. PLEASE FEED ME. I'll respond

to everyone soon!!! Thank you!!!!!!! Hopefully the next chapter will come quickly!!!!

Early Shana Tova <3

40. Sticky

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for descriptions of blood

OCTOBER 30 1987

JANE HOPPER

While Mike builds the fire, far faster than he has any right to, really, you can't stop watching the sun.

The sun doesn't really seem...

Visible...

Anymore.

And the mere fact makes you shiver even more.

Even though you're already shivering.

A lot.

Because.

Snowstorm.

Infinite blizzard.

Hitting every corner of the planet.

You want to cry some more, but you know you can't. So you just watch Mike build a huge fire outside the house, stacking up wood after wood, keeping it dry with blankets and towels, watching you occasionally as you peer out the window.

Chester and Eddie are safe inside of the cage, near but not too near the fire. And you're just waiting.

Waiting for the time to make your move.

It will be harder, of course.

Harder.

Almost unbearable.

To try and.

Strain.

Like that.

Without Mike.

But you have to.

Because you have to get the party here

And Mike has to maintain the fire

So that people know *where to go*.

Otherwise, you see

They'd get lost in the snow

And neither of you want that.

So you watch.

You watch and you wait.

And you hope.

You hope you're strong enough.

You think you're strong enough.

No.

You *know* you're strong enough.

You square your shoulders and watch, waiting.

You drink some water, eat some more cereal.

You know you can do this.

You can gather the party together.

And you can defeat...

Whatever this is.

If it's the Mind Flayer...

Or something else.

You.

Can.

Do.

This.

You can do this, Jane Hopper.

(Future Jane Levinson?)

Jane Hopper.

If anyone can do this, it's you.

Literally.

Because psychic bacteria things.

...

Why is your life so *strange*.

The fire is starting to go hard, now, lighting up the outside extensively, which is good both because it will light the way for your friends, and also because you can't really see the sun anymore?

You look up.

Yup, no sun.

No sun at all.

Completely blotted out.

You shiver again.

The fire is blazing, hot and white against your eyes, leaving impressions that practically blind you. You can see Mike in the reflection of the flames, the light dancing in his eyes, as he looks up back at you. He can't stuff *all* of his hair in his caps, so you see his curls bounce against his neck and face with the motion.

You can't help but smile at him.

He came out, all the way, in the snow, to be with you.

Not much of a surprise, no.

But you still can't figure out...

How you got so lucky.

You take a deep breath, and nod at him. He gives you a thumbs up, and you walk back to the fire place, where Eddie and Chester are chirping together, clearly still doing okay (though very puffy).

The sight makes you breathe, a little, with relief.

You sit down, bundle yourself up in blankets, and block out your senses.

Got to reach... someone.

Who first?

Dad.

You look everywhere for him.

Your mind is dark and vast.

The void is here but... tight

Tight

So huge, and yet, not big enough

You don't know whether the darkness is filled with...

With...

Something...

Else

"Dad?" you shout

Into the darkness

It doesn't echo, like the void usually does

You gulp

"D... Dad?"

You take a deep breath.

"Dad?"

Still.

Nothing.

You strain a little more, rather than shout. You look.

You feel

Through the... soup

The constricting, black soup

It can't be the Mind Flayer....

You know what that felt like...

He didn't feel like...

This...

Did he?

You keep stretching, and looking, and finding

You can find Dad. You know him as well as anyone.

The only one you know better is Mike.

You can find him.

You *can*.

You *can* find him.

Keep looking, Jane.

Ignore the blood on your face, Jane.

Just do it.

Just look.

Find him.

Find –

You suddenly land, in a more open space.

It's like you swam through oil.

Through sludge.

Through *tar*.

Black, sticky tar, covering every inch of you

Touching you in ways you shuddered to think about.

You want to vomit, but you hold it in.

And you see Dad at the urther end of the distance.

“DAD!” you shout, running forward. He’s hunched over, shivering.

Cold.

Weak.

“J – Jane?” he gasps out, his voice hoarse.

“Dad!” you cry out, joy overtaking you.

“Jane – how –“

“Mike and I are working together to –“

“Mike? He’s with you?” Dad asks, his eyes opening in shock.

“Yeah, he came through the blizzard for me –“

“Oh thank *God* –“

“What –“

“I feel so guilty, Jane, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry I left you alone, I just thought I could – find –“

“Where are you now?”

“The Police Station. There’s no fire, so I’ve been... well... I’m very weak, Jane, I –“

“Dad, you need to walk back.”

“I’ll get lost in the snow –“

“No, you *have* to. Mike’s made a bonfire. You should be able to find your way. Just follow the smoke and the fire.”

“But –“

“I know you’re weak but you *have* to. We have to all come together. We have to fix this.”

“Jane, it’s just a blizzard –“

“DAD,” you shout, before you can stop yourself. He looks at you in shock.

“It’s not just a blizzard. We know this. We’ve seen this happen,” you take a deep breath, “Again, and again, and again, and again...”

“Okay...”

“I looked at the President –“

“You *what* –“

“And apparently it’s snowing *everywhere*. The whole *world*. Hawkins is just... the worst.”

He sighs.

“Kid, I’m... too weak to leave...”

“You aren’t. You can do it. It’s not that long of a walk,” you whisper.

“When there’s this much snow, it might as well be miles.”

“You can do it. I believe in you.”

He studies you for a long time.

“Jane...”

“*Please*, Dad. *Please*.”

You can’t stop tears from falling out of your eyes.

“You need to be somewhere warm, and with food, it’s not going to end, so you need to... you need to...”

You take a deep breath.

“You *need* to come back, Dad, *please*.”

Dad watches you for a long moment.

And then he nods.

“Okay.”

“Thank you,” you gasp, unable to stop your body from shaking with relief –

Or cold?

It’s been a while...

“Now you, go, you’ll hurt yourself if you stay here too long,” Dad orders.

You nod, and pull yourself out.

It goes much faster than pushing yourself in.

You come back to the world, gasping for breath, holding onto your chest with shock. Mike is watching you, worriedly, from outside, his face pressed up against the window. You get up, throw the blanket around you, and scurry to the door, sliding out to meet him.

“Jane? What happened?”

“Dad’s alive...”

Mike breathes with relief.

“And he’s coming here.”

He nods, biting his lip.

“How’s... he doing?”

“Bad,” you sigh, reaching out and hugging Mike as tightly as you can, “He’s... really weak.”

“I’ll stay here and keep the fire going, and keep a lookout. Are you going to be able to call anyone else?”

“I... don’t know. I... have to, don’t I?”

He nods, tears leaking from his eyes.

“I’m sorry Jane.”

“I’ll... be okay.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me in there with you?”

“Yes,” you whisper, though you’re not sure.

You’re never sure.

You wish you could see the sun, but the only light comes from the fire.

“Okay... I just should make sure the fire doesn’t go out.”

“I agree.”

He nods, and gently traces his fingertips along your cheek, before walking back to the fire. You go back inside, wipe off your nose, eat more cereal, and go in again.

Sludge, muck, what the fuck

Drop

Fall

Into

Find

Get

Through

The

Muck

Reach –

Reach –

Reach –

“Bubbe!” you gasp, falling to the ground in front of her.

She jumps, looking in shock, her eyes wide.

“J – Jane? Zeisele... where... how...”

“I’m visiting you in the void, remember, I did this when you were possessed?” you gasp out, trying to not pass out.

“Yes – yes but – why –“

“Mike is safe! He’s here with me –“

“Oh *Baruch HaShem*, thank you, thank you zeisele –“

“But we need you all to come here.”

Bubbe stares at you in shock.

“Go... there?”

“Yes –“

“It’s... still a blizzard. The power is off, the gas is off, the telephones are out, the sun is... just... not there...”

“I know,” you say, your voice cracking with despair, “But you *have to go*.”

“Why –“

“We need the whole party together to plan.”

“Zeisele –“

“We have plenty of food and water because Dad is crazy, and Mike has a bonfire going so you can find your way – please – please, Bubbe –“

“Jane, we have to stay here, it’s not safe –“

“Aren’t you a survivor?” you shout before you can stop yourself. Bubbe looks at you in shock.

“S –“

“You and me. Survivors. Right? We’re survivors, right?” you say, rambling before you can stop yourself, “So if we’re both survivors, you can find me, *right?*”

“I...”

Bubbe squares her shouldres, looks at you, and nods.

“Yes. I can find you.”

“You can do it. We’re survivors,” you repeat again.”

“Yes. Survivors,” Bubbe nods, squaring her jaw, “Care for yourself. Call the others. We know what to do.”

You leave her, falling again, getting mental whiplash –

But she’s coming. They’re all coming.

Two down.

You keep calling people, while Mike keeps the fire going outside – Will and Joyce and Steve, Lucas and Lucas’ family, Dustin and his Mom, your Siblings at the Cabin, Doc Owens. You manage to get to everyone in town –

Drudging through sludge –

Your mind like quicksand –

Not trusting what is real, and what isn’t –

How can the Mind Flayer be inside your head, *Doctor Owens made a vaccine* –

When you finish calling everyone, when you finally wake up from the

chaos, you weakly give the birds more food and water, and limp to look outside.

Mike maintains the fire, looking frozen, standing far too close to it, but he looks up when you appear at the window and smiles at you.

You hold your thumb up at him, smiling only weakly.

It won't have worked until everyone is here.

You're so tired you can barely keep yourself upright, but you manage to crawl back to the birds, lying in front of the fire and curling around yourself.

Must keep warm.

Must keep safe.

Must build energy back up

Must...

Not...

You're no longer in the living room.

What you see around yourself, instead, is a thousand demo-dogs surrounding you

No matter how much you use your powers –

Sending them back –

Sending them everywhere –

They just keep crawling to you –

Dog after dog after dog after dog –

Mouths hanging open –

Teeth visible, gleaming in the low light –

You only manage to keep them slightly away from you –

You can't help but scream, and scream

And scream

And

Scr

Eam

Scream

“Jane? *Jane?*”

You open your eyes and look in shock as Mike hovers over you.

“Jane – were you –“

“Another episode –“ you croak out.

He pulls you into a tight hug, refusing to let go of you, and his touch sends you into an almost instantaneously calmer state.

“You have blood all over your nose – I'll help – come on, sit up –“

Mike helps you back up, dabbing at your nose with a tissue and giving you water to drink. You sip it slowly, letting the light and warmth of the fire reenergize your bones, pull you out of, well, *whatever* that was...

“It's okay, Jane, he's not here, he's never *going* to be here, he's –“

“It wasn't him, it wasn't, it was –“

“It wasn't Brenner?” Mike looks so confused it's almost adorable.

“It was demo-dogs, dozens of them, all coming up and surrounding me, trying to attack me, trying to get me –“

Mike holds you so tightly you can barely breathe.

“What – did it seem – real?”

“No, it didn’t,” you reassure softly, “It was... like a dream.”

“Okay...”

“I promise, it didn’t feel real at all.”

“So it just...?”

“Freaked me out.”

You watch each other for a long time.

“I don’t know how,” Mike whispers, “But that inky bastard is doing everything he can to freak us out.”

You nod silently.

“Okay. We have to stay calm –“

“How do we *stay calm*?” you shriek, before you can stop yourself.

Mike pulls you into a soft kiss that leaves you shaking from something other than cold, for once. You hold onto each other for a long time, Mike pressing his forehead into yours and the tip of his nose against yours, the two of you just watching each other, your eyes searching into the other. You swallow reflexively, your heart pounding much faster than it ought to, and Mike’s fingers trace along your cheek and chin and neck.

“We can do this,” he whispers after a long, pointed pause.

“We can do this,” you agree quietly.

“We’re strong,” he continues.

“We are strong,” you affirm.

“We can handle anything,” he says, smiling a little.

You smile back, “We can handle anything.”

“We’ve survived mental illness.”

“We *have* survived mental illness.”

“We’ve survived this asshole before.”

“We have *definitely* survived this asshole before.”

“We’re *surviving* being teenagers.”

“We are... certainly doing that.”

You both laugh, grinning at each other.

Your heart flips again.

Before he can say another affirmation, you reach up and stroke his hair, letting his curls fall between your fingers.

“We are going to get out of this,” you murmur quietly, “Together.”

“We’re going to get out of this,” he agrees, kissing your nose, “And then we can be whatever we want.”

“Whatever we want?”

“Anything we want.”

You kiss him on the lips, before pulling away finally, breathing in deeply and nodding.

“You should go back out there,” you say softly, “You have to watch for them all.”

Mike sighs, “But I don’t want to leave you –“

“And I don’t want your bonfire to burn down the house.”

He sighs again, nods, and leaves the room, shrugging into the various outer layers he had left strewn about the room. You watch him, smiling just a little bit, until he leaves and goes back outside into the snow.

You wish you could go out with him.

But you're too weak.

And someone needs to stay with Chester and Eddie.

So you get up and watch them as they sleep in the cage, as puffy as they can make themselves, and you wish you could do more. You wish you could help them more.

You wish this wasn't happening.

No one deserved it, but especially not your puffs.

They were just innocent little birdies who deserved to be safe, and warm, and –

You could feel yourself beginning to spiral.

It was way too easy for that to start, now

For your mind to start tightening around itself?

Like you were constantly on the edge.

This isn't good.

This isn't good.

This isn't good.

You pace the room, trying to think about happy things.

The smell of the house when Joyce cooks French Toast.

The feeling of the birds cuddled and sleeping against your chest.

You and Will laughing and playing a board game together.

Dad and you building a puzzle and getting weirdly competitive about it.

Playing the mediator between Dustin and Lucas and forcing them to

stop bickering and all laughing about how often the situation repeated itself.

Braiding Max's hair.

Reminiscing about the *good* parts of your childhood with Wiconi and Renee and Mpilo and Maria and Rico.

Burying yourself in Mike's embrace,

Never willing to let go.

You let out a long breath you didn't know you were holding and slide back down to the ground, staring out in front of you, watching the flames again.

You don't know how long you stare at the flames, letting the way they crackle and sway distract you from the storm inside your head and outside the house, until you jump at the sound of the door opening again.

You've been alone *far* too long.

"Guess who's here!" Mike cheers, and you look up to see Dad wandering in, giving you a weak smile. You run to help hold him up, pulling him into the house and helping to get him food and water.

"Thanks, kid," Dad sighs, his voice barely over a whisper.

"No more brave running off," you grunt angrily.

"You're asking a leopard to change its spots, Jane," Mike jokes.

"Regardless, I'll... think about it. More. Next time," Dad reassures.

"For now he should rest," Mike pauses, "And I should go back out there."

You nod, as Dad fashions a bed for himself next to the fire, lying down in a ball and sleeping almost instantly. Your spot now taken by his sleeping form, you resume your pacing, periodically checking on the birds and then looking out the window.

Luckily, having at least one person back manages to keep your mind aloft.

Aloft and out of the spiral.

That was the goal.

Bigger goals could wait.

After a while again, the door opens once more. Joyce and Will and Steve and Bubbe and Zayde and Mike's Mom and Holly all tumble in; Will immediately running forward to hug you tightly.

"I'm sorry we left – I'm sorry we left – I'm sorry we left – I'm sorry we left –"

"It's okay!" you gasp "It's okay, I know why you did, and we didn't... know..."

"That it would get this bad?" Steve grunts angrily, "No, no we did not, and I wish *someone* in this stupid party had figured that out before *the great blizzard of doom.*"

"Look, there's no point in focusing on all that right now," Joyce snaps, frowning at Steve, "We have to regroup, figure this *out*, figure out how we're going to fight –"

"We're?" Mike's Mom frowns, "As in, all of us?"

"No," you say softly. Everyone turns to look at you.

"Um... Mike's Mom. I'd like you and Holly to watch the birds, if you can, if that's okay?"

"Absolutely, sweetheart," Mike's Mom says, sighing with relief, "Bubbe and Zayde can too –"

"We'll go where we're needed," Bubbe says firmly. Zayde nods next to her, looking angry.

"I've punched many Nazis in my time," Zayde says, "This is the closest I'm probably going to come to that purest of joys again."

“And I wish I had had the strength to punch them before,” Bubbe snorts, “But I’m not holding back now.”

“Ima, Aba –“

“Karen, we love you,” Bubbe murmurs softly, “But the kids need all the help they can get.”

“We promise to take care of ourselves,” Zayde agrees.

You slip out, unable to stop your heart from clenching at the mere *thought* of them being in... whatever came next, whether it was a fight or a heist or what. You reach Mike, standing near the bonfire, which is still going. Smoke billows up to the sky, creating a faintly glowing column, the only bright thing against the pitch black world.

“Hey,” he whispers softly.

“Hey,” you answer, reaching over to hold his hand.

“It’s less cold, now.”

“Maybe the Mind Flayer is getting too tired?”

“I don’t think so,” Mike pauses, “I think he’s building up to something.”

You watch each other, squeezing each other’s hands more, equal masks of desperation on your faces.

“I love you, Jane.”

“I love you, Mike.”

You lean up and kiss him, holding onto him for dear life, because maybe it *was* for dear life –“

“Glad to see shit hasn’t changed in the past few months.”

You both look up in shock, your mouth dropping open so much it’s practically hit the floor.

“*Max?!’*” you shout in unison.

She's standing there, her long red hair separated into braids to be out of the way. Multiple jackets are on her body, making her arms puff out at the sides, as are snow pants and a hat and *snowshoes*. She looks at you both with a smirk, wiping her hair out of her eyes.

"Yup, it's me. Don't get all wishy washy on me now –"

You both run to tackle her with hugs anyway.

"How are you even *here*?" Mike asks in amazement as Max laughs despite herself in your arms.

"Because I'm a badass, obviously –"

"That's not enough of an explanation!" you shout out before you can help yourself, but you're so happy to see her and know she's safe you can't help but smile from ear to ear.

"No, it's not, but – where's Lucas?" she asks softly, her face drawn into a very weak smile.

"On his way," Mike reassures, "I promise, on his way. Let's get you inside where it's warm, and you can wait to tell your story until everyone's here."

"You know how much I hate to repeat stories," Max laughs.

"Exactly," you smile at her. She hugs you tightly, and you all wander into the house.

"MAX!" Will shouts, running forward and hugging her. Everyone starts laughing and talking and hugging her, Mike slipping back outside to wait.

So you follow him.

"Jane? You should be keeping Max company," Mike says in surprise.

"Maybe, but you need company, too," you laugh, walking up to him and kissing him on the cheek.

"That's true," Mike smiles a little, "It's very... lonely out here."

You kiss him softly on the cheek, “I’m sorry, Mike.”

“It’s alright. Just waiting for everyone else, you know?” Mike grins a little, “Though, with Max being here...”

“You’re no longer that worried that they’ll make it?”

“Not worried at all, honestly. She can go, apparently, across the entire United States to reach this group-up without realizing we were calling everyone here,” Mike laughs.

You giggle with him, warmth filling you up like it hadn’t since this mess started.

Maybe, if everyone was there... you could keep the Mind Flayer away... forever...

The thought makes you kiss Mike harder than you had since this mess began.

Mike squeaks so loudly he might as well have been the wheel of a bike lacking oil. You laugh loudly and he hugs you tight to him, the two of you just holding on to each other and enjoying the brief minute of peace. You can even pretend the snow falling gently around you is romantic, and just just a calm in the endless deluge.

“Jane,” Mike murmurs softly.

“Yeah?”

“When this is all over...”

Mike has come so far.

He can talk about the future, at least a little bit.

But usually not in situations like this.

Usually, when things were going *really* bad...

Or everything was *really* stressful...

He would hold out for just a little bit.

Just until you knew.

So you're taken aback, like your mind has been pushed into a hole you didn't know was behind you, but in a weirdly good kind of way. Like the hole is filled with a ball pit.

"What... do you mean?"

"Just..." Mike breathes in deeply, "When this is all over..."

You watch him for a long minute, while he seems to search for words, his eyes still lit up with the fire, almost dancing in front of you.

"When this is all over, and we've *finished off* that bastard, then... I want... just the two of us... to go on a trip."

"A trip?" you laugh.

"Yeah," Mike smiles a little bit, "I want us to... I don't know. Go to Chicago together, just for fun, because you love it so much. Or somewhere else! We could go to New York, or LA, or anywhere you want. But we should just... drive... and go somewhere... and let go of things, for a bit."

"Yeah," you smile, reaching up to kiss him, "Yeah, I'd like that, too."

"It is *too cold* and *too apocalyptic* for you two to be making *kissy faces* in the fucking blizzard!"

You turn away from each other to see Lucas and his family and Dustin and his mom and cat, and your smile grows as large as it can muster.

"Lucas! Dustin!" Mike cheers, and you both run forward to them, tackling them in hugs.

"Woah! Dude, don't knock me into the snow –"

"Can we *please* go inside? I am *frozen* and don't even know *why* we went on this stupid walk anyway," Erica grumbles angrily next to Lucas.

“Wait, one sec,” Mike pauses, “Lucas, come on.”

He grabs Lucas’ arm and drags him forward. You grab Dustin’s, happily pulling him through the snow up to the house, the families following slowly and in confusion.

Mike swings the door open wide, and continues to pull Lucas forward.

You follow eagerly behind, Dustin looking at you in confusion, but you don’t want to miss this.

“What the *fuck* is – *Max*?” Lucas gasps, stopping in his tracks as he looks at Max. They almost match, with similar layers of ratty clothing strategically wrapped around their bodies. Max’s face bursts into a wide smile, and she runs up and tackles Lucas, who immediately grabs her in return, spinning her around in the room.

“I – I can’t – I can’t believe –“ Lucas rambles, but Max cuts him off with a kiss, making him just hold onto her tighter.

“Holy *shit*,” Dustin shouts joyously, jumping up and down and clapping his hands.

“Can *someone* please tell me what is going on?” Lucas’ Dad asks, as they all pile into the house, “Lucas just *insisted* we follow him across town, during a blizzard, risking our lives –“

“Your lives are already at risk,” Dad grunts angrily.

“*Dad*,” you shout, almost furious. He frowns at you.

“It’s true.”

“But you shouldn’t say it!”

“Claudia, Shelly, Zach,” Mike’s Mom sighs, coming out from behind everyone else, “Come on. I should explain to you everything going on. It’s... well. It might explain some things.”

“This better be good,” Lucas’ Mom mutters, but everyone unaware of... the weirdness... followed Mike’s Mom to another room, still

close enough for the warmth of the fire to do *something*. You ignore their softly muttering voices, turning back to Max and Lucas and the others.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Lucas whispers, tears coming out of his eyes. Max smiles up at him, almost smirking really, but also with genuine joy filtering through to her expression.

“Please. Like I’d miss the chance to take down that son of a bitch for everything he’s done to us. The moment I saw there was this weird snowstorm – even in fucking *California*, Lucas – I got in the car and drove to Hawkins. Didn’t stop until I couldn’t get through the snow anymore, then walked the rest of the way. Helped there was a fire to follow at the end of it, though...”

Lucas lets out a choked laugh, kissing her on the forehead.

“I just – if anything happens to you –“

“Please,” Max repeats, glaring at him now, “You all need me. You wouldn’t be able to fight this monster *without* me.”

“She’s right,” Dustin points out.

Lucas smiles, “I know.”

Max smiles back, and you reach out to hug her, when –

“*Ahh!*”

You turn around at the shout, your blood growing cold as you see Mike on the floor, holding his knees up to his chest, blood spilling out of his nostrils.

“No – No – No – NO – “

“Mike? *Mike!*” you scream, diving to the floor and grabbing for his arm, trying to hold him still as he writhes on the floor, “Mike –“

“No no no no no no no –“

“Mike! Mike! Mike!”

“Fuck –“

“Shit!”

“What’s happening?”

“Someone get him still –“

“Mikha’el, can you hear me, *Mike* –“

“Zeisele, please, please stop –“

“No no no NO NO NO NO NO NO –“

He’s screaming at the top of his lungs now, and his screams are causing the birds to scream, and everyone’s in the living room now (which is much warmer with so many people crammed in, contributing all of their body heat) watching in shock and horror, and the birds are screaming too and it’s just increasing how *afraid* you are, and you’re sobbing and trying to get him to stop –

“Mike, Mike, *please*, Mike –“

“NO, NO, NO, NO, N-“

He suddenly stops screaming, collapsing against the floor, still panting and shaking where he lies. You cry heavily, reaching out for him and gripping his shoulder, more gently now, but still refusing to let go.

“Mike...? Mike...”

“Wh... What... Where...”

“You had an episode again,” you whisper, your voice shaking with every word, “A really bad one.”

Mike sits up too fast in response, swaying lightly in his spot as a result, reaching out for your shoulders and gripping them tightly.

“I – episode – I –“

“What did you see, kid?” Dad asks.

"I... I... I just saw... death...." Mike chokes out, "Everyone... dying..."

"*Everyone?*" Will asks in a whisper.

"The whole... town..."

"Was this a future vision?" Zayde asks quietly.

"No," Mike mumbles.

"We've been having weird visions of things lately," you explain
"But... none of them feel like that kind of thing. It's more..."

"The Mind Flayer's trying to get us to break down," Mike finishes, wiping off the blood from his face.

"How can he be doing *any* of this?" Steve shouts, holding his hands above his head, "He's *gone!* The gate is *closed!* You blew him *up!* We have *vaccines!*"

"I don't know, but who else could it be?" you ask softly.

"Maybe the Department of Energy released some sort of thing to make us all *die* because we're *troublemakers* –"

"They wouldn't do that to the whole world, though," Dustin points out.

"Meanwhile, the bastard would like nothing more than to make everyone freeze to death," Will mutters, "When he's gotten us taken care of, he'll move on to finish off the world."

You all stare at each other in shock.

"Let's wait for Doc and the other psychics to show up," Dad mutters, "Then we can come up with... *something* like a plan..."

You pull Mike up and help him relax, Dustin bringing over water and Will bringing a blanket. Mike rests his head on your shoulder, hunched over to do so, and the hopeful mood is killed –

Just like that.

The door opens again, and you look up wearily, hoping –

“Alright, fucknuggets, who left the bonfire unattended?”

Your eyes widen as Wiconi and the others walk in, Wiconi rolling her eyes immediately.

“Is it out of control?” Dad asks, jumping to his feet.

“No, it just seems like something of an oversight,” Renee mutters, “Which is why *I* believe it is a sign of problems, Wiconi –“

“Problems, shroblems. We’ve got fish to fry. So is everyone here? Can kill that shit and prevent a town fire on top of everything else?”

“In defense of letting it continue, the snow will put everything out eventually,” Will mutters.

“Ah, my favorite smartass. How’s the apocalypse been for you?”

“Cold.”

“Thank you for this wonderful catch-up conversation –“

“*Besides* all of that,” Dad shouts, “We’re waiting on Doc.”

“Must we?” Mpilo sighs.

“Yes, we must,” Renee snaps back, “We need everyone here to come up with a plan. The longer the sun is blocked out by the Mind Flayer, because I can’t come up with *any* other idea as to what this could be, the more the world will suffer – plants won’t be able to make food, and animals won’t be able to *find* food as a result, and then you start to get widespread, rapid foodchain collapse on levels this planet hasn’t seen in millions of years –”

“What plan? We freeze to death. Ta da, the end, nice knowing you all,” Wiconi snorts.

“I don’t know how helpful you’re being –“

“Helpful flew out the window a *week* ago.”

“This is our responsibility to put right –“

“*Our* responsibility? It’s that fucking lab’s responsibility, Mpilo, and you’re a fucking idiot if you think otherwise.”

“We are responsible for our own powers –“

“Jane wasn’t when she opened that portal!”

“Regardless, Mpilo, maybe we should figure out a way to open up the gate to that universe anyway –“

“What the fuck, *why*?”

“Because then we can fight the Mind Flayer and take him down before he gets the jump on us!”

“That’s literally insane –“

“There’s *no way* we’re doing that –“

“Renee, you are disqualified from offering advice –“

“*Does ANYONE HAVE A BETTER PLAN* –“

“Shut UP!”

Everyone look at Maria in shock, her arms folded tightly across her chest as she looks up at everyone glaring. Rico grins from behind Renee, pure delight dancing on his face.

“Shut *up*! I am sick of all your *bickering*!” Maria says, more words coming out of her mouth, more words than you’d ever heard her say –

It reminds you of, well, you, a little bit *too much* –

“Fighting nonstop! Yell yell yell! When *all* you are *actually* mad about is how *scary* this all is, and how you feel like you don’t have control! You’re ashamed because you don’t have control! But you help *no one* with your fighting! No one! Stop it!” Maria stomps her foot on the

ground, “We have to help! No more fighting!”

Everyone stares at her in shock; Mpilo, Renee, and Wiconi are rendered entirely speechless.

“I know I don’t talk about my powers much,” Rico murmurs softly, “Because until recently, no one knew what they were... not even the lab knew... they developed so late, but I still had psychic signatures... But I think, from them, there’s a way we can help, actively, *now*, even while we don’t really... know... what’s happening...”

“What is it?” Mike croaks quietly.

“I’m telepathic with non-psychics,” Rico pauses, “And everyone’s scared. Everyone in the town is *terrified* of what’s going on, of how *long* it will go on – where they’ll get food, medicine, everything. No one feels safe. We should help them.”

“Yes,” Mike responds immediately, standing up and looking at Rico in shock, “Yes, we need to help everyone – no one should die – not for this – not for us –”

“How are we going to help them?” Bubbe asks.

“*Can* we help them?” Mike’s Mom sighs.

“We can,” Renee frowns, “But we need the Doc here.”

“Why?” Wiconi grumbles.

“Because I have an idea?” Renee sighs, “Involving the lab and food stores.”

“Involving... the lab,” Dad frowns, “The lab that no longer runs.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Renee smirks, “But it’s not, you know, *gone*.”

“What... is this idea?” you ask, frowning.

“I want to see if Doc thinks it’s at *all* feasible first, but –”

"You... don't *know* if it's feasible?" Dustin jokes. Renee glares at him for a long time, making Max burst into chuckling.

Mike just looks pale and afraid next to you.

It's setting your teeth on edge – no –

Your whole *body* on edge –

This is the exact opposite of what should happen –

You needed to calm down –

You *both* needed to calm down –

How –

How do you calm *down* –

"Hello Everyone!"

"Hi Doc," everyone responds tiredly as Doctor Owens comes into the room, as bundled as the rest of you, but looking rather *cheery* for someone living during the end of the world.

It makes you more annoyed than you can really put into words.

"Alright, Doc, first question –"

"Hold your horses, Renee, I have to wipe off my boots –"

"Horses are for riding, not holding. We are thinking of providing relief for the town since, ya know, the *only* reason they're under attack with this storm is that they're *unlucky enough to be next to **your** lab* –"

"How would we provide relief to the town in this?" Owens asks, frowning, "The snow is too thick to get through –"

"And yet, you're here," Wiconi mutters sarcastically.

"For *everyone* to get through," Owens corrects, "We'd need to shovel – clear walkways – nevermind how we would get supplies for the relief

in question –“

“The Lab is still a building, right?” Renee asks.

“What are you getting at?”

“We use the equipment still left at the lab. There has to be some heavy machinery, even salt, flame blowers, things we could use to clear walkways and paths. Even food, maybe, nonperishable food at any rate. We have to distribute blankets, food, supplies to the people – we can’t let them die for the mistakes of the lab –“

“Renee –“

“Doc, this isn’t a discussion, this is an order,” Dad says, stepping in and glaring, “So? Would the lab have anything?”

Owens stares at Dad and Renee for a long time, before sighing, “I... I believe so, yes. Yes, there should be some things there...”

“Great,” Dad says, “Then let’s head out.”

“Head *out*? The sun might be blocked out with clouds and snow, and time an illusion, but it’s still ten in the evening –“

“We don’t have time to waste. These people – *my town* – has been isolated and snowed in for more than a week. We have to head out, get started, get to work. *Now*, Doc.”

“Alright, alright!”

“Mpilo, Renee, Wiconi, Steve, you’re coming too. We need to work together to get there. Any other adults want to -?”

“I’m in, Hop,” Joyce murmurs.

“I’m coming too,” Zayde agrees.

“Me as well,” Bubbe nods.

“I’ll help out, Hopper,” Lucas’ mom says.

“Like hell you will –“

“Zachary, if you stop me from helping these people attempt to save our town, you have more problems than *snow* and our child’s apparent life fighting against supernatural forces –“

“Fine, then I’m coming too.”

“We should come too,” Mike says, standing up.

“No,” Dad says firmly.

“Zeisele, you have done wonderful work, you and Jane, you have worked so hard,” Zayde murmurs, “But you need to rest. We don’t know what’s coming, all you kids need to rest and build up your strength – your mental health –“

“Especially you two,” Wiconi sighs.

“If you two break, we have bigger problems, and we all know this,” Renee agrees.

You look at Mike desperately, and he sighs and nods.

“You guys can help tomorrow, after you get some rest. I promise,” Dad continues.

“Okay,” you murmur.

“Be safe,” Lucas whispers.

“We will, son,” his dad responds, giving him a large hug. You hug your Dad, and then Bubbe and Zayde – everyone’s hugging, really, you hug everyone, it’s just a giant group hug – before they set out, back into the cold and the snow. Those remaining start to walk around, talking quietly, everyone giving you and Mike worried looks.

You hate that they’re giving you both worried looks.

It makes it feel like the explosion is a foregone conclusion,

When you’re trying your *hardest* to fight against it.

You curl up next to Mike on the ground near the fire, and fall asleep

almost instantly.

OCTOBER 31 1987

You have to admit, working with everyone to give food to the town makes you feel like you're making up for things.

Maybe you're still a little frenzied –

A little chaotic –

A little swimming through sludge –

But you are glad you're helping everyone, putting food out on tables, and the entire town is gathered in the main center, and it's actually warm with the bonfire that Mpilo is stoking, and everyone who went out the night before made it back, and it looks like things are working out –

Just a little bit, anyway.

"Feeling any better?" you ask Mike, smiling weakly at him as the two of you dish out food together, managing to have made soup over a fire with various canned vegetables scrounged up from the grocery store.

"Yeah," Mike laughs, "Only a few people died in town this week, and we're helping people now. They're getting food and warmth and we're not all holed up in places alone anymore."

"Yeah," you smile, "This is good. Plus, real food."

"Real food," Mike agrees.

"Alright," Steve walks up, a dead deer over his shoulder, "Who do I need to talk to about taking care of this."

"What... the fuck..." Mike gasps.

"I shot a deer. Does Chief know how to... deal with this sort of thing? Make it into food?" Steve grimaces.

"I have... *so* many questions," you say, trying hard to not laugh.

"Steve Harrington, I swear to God, you better not have a dead deer on your back!" Dad shouts from across the plaza, walking over to you all with his brow deeply furrowed.

"Yes, yes I do have a dead deer on my back –"

"Kids, help me with this, I think I can manage to make some bread," Bubbe shouts. You eagerly run over to her, and Mike comes too, with Will and Rico taking your places at the soup.

"Challah? In *this* weather?" Mike jokes.

"No sass from you –"

"Wow, it really *is* the apocalypse –"

"Oy vey, I don't know *why* I try. Yes, we're going to try and make some challah, we'll let it rise by the fire, and it's certainly humid enough."

"But eggs?" you ask.

"They haven't expired yet! So we're going to put them to work in some bread, get everyone some carbs and some protein, come on kids –"

You form a line, all of you mixing ingredients together in bowls, your arms getting tired and your face cold from snow, but the tent you've raised above your heads keeps the food mostly dry. Joyce comes over to help as well, and you're all rolling out dough and leaving it to rise next to the fire, multiple large balls of dough that almost makes this feel...

Normal?

"Mike, Jane, come back over here!"

You run up to Doctor Owens, who is distributing blankets to people, and eagerly start to help, passing out the warm fabric to lines and lines of people coming up to you all.

“Thank you so much –“

“We were really starting to go hungry –“

“You’re all lifesavers, truly –“

Mike looks relieved at the crowds of people, and you wrap an arm around him, causing him to wrap an arm around you in return.

“We’ve got this,” he murmurs softly.

“We do,” you agree, leaning up to kiss him on the lips, “We do.”

“Guys,” Will shouts. You look over at him, walking up to him across the square.

“What’s up?” you ask, looking at him and Rico as they ladle out soup.

“We should try to figure out a way to send out help signals,” Rico suggests softly, “This is good for now, but I don’t know if we can keep it up...”

Will watches Rico worriedly.

“Is it bad?”

“A little,” Rico admits, “People are relieved, but still... scared...”

“Of course they’re scared,” Mike sighs next to you.

“How are we going to *stop* the snow?” you mutter.

“I don’t know, but this is a small town. We should get them out of the blast zone,” Rico continues.

“I agree,” Will nods.

“How do we get them out of here, though?” you ask.

“I... don’t know,” Rico admits.

“It’s almost impossible to get in and out,” Mike says, frowning, “I still don’t *quite* understand how Max managed to do it.”

“Well, clearly she did, so –“

“Did someone mention me?” Max asks, walking up to you all.

You feel your brain start to swirl a little bit.

It’s starting to get too overwhelming –

The crowds, the friends,

The work, the bickering –

Your head hurts.

“How’d you get into town?” Will asks.

“I walked. I had snowshoes,” Max responds, frowning.

“Is there any way you can think of for people to get *out*?”

“Not... really...”

“So they’re doomed anyway?” Mike shouts, looking furious. Everyone turns to look at you, people murmuring quietly all around the square, and your heart starts to pound, practically leaving your chest.

“Mike, shhh –“

“You’re not helping anyone –“

“Rico, do you need me to calm people down?”

“No, no, let’s just talk softly, I don’t think anyone’s going to really freak out as long as we give them all time to calm down...”

“I can’t *be calm*!” Mike hisses, holding onto his hair tightly and practically pulling it out.

“Mike –“ you gasp, reaching out for him.

Oh no oh no oh no oh no –

“Mike, please, you’re not helping –“

“Exactly! Exactly! Exactly!”

“*Mike* –“ you beg, dragging him away from the main area, pulling him to somewhere alone, because you have to calm him down, and you’re best at it alone –

“Don’t you see, Jane?” Mike whispers.

“Don’t I see – what?”

“We need to help them. We need to help them. If we don’t then this is... this is... all our fault –“

“It’s not our fault, Mike. How many times have you told me that?”

“This is different – we could have opened the hole – like Renee said last night – finished this *ages* ago –“

“I’m not sure that would have helped,” Rico mutters, walking up behind you all, with others in his wake.

“Yeah, Mike, you thought you could keep it closed.”

“We *knew* everything was going wrong!” Mike shouts, “We knew – the nosebleeds, the bloody wrists and legs, the cold weather, and we did *nothing* – *nothing!*”

“Mike, *please*,” you beg, tears leaking out of your eyes.

“We should have evacuated everyone *weeks* ago! We should have done something! We should have –“

“Mike, *please* –“

“Michael, please calm down,” Doctor Owens says, walking up to everyone, “I’m not sure we could have done that anyway.”

“What – why?” Mike whispers.

Doctor Owens sighs. Most of the party is gathered around now, Dad walking up behind you with a frown.

“What aren’t you saying, Doc?”

Doctor Owens sighs again, while Mike stews next to you, and his angry energy feeds over to you, and just shatters you, everything is shattering –

Everything had been going *so well* –

You were feeding people and keeping them warm and together and managing to get the community working again even though the sun was gone and the snow was heavy –

“I’m saying... there are still higher ups who are... let’s say... *annoyed*... with how this project turned out,” Doctor Owens mutters.

“*Annoyed?*” Renee snaps.

“They are furious, honestly, and they’ve been wanting to cull the project for years –“

“*Cull the project?*” Wiconi hisses.

“Yes, pull the plug, kill any people who know about it –“

“For fuck’s sake!” Dad shouts.

“And I knew, when you asked, for the other test subjects – kids – psychics – that if you’d gathered too many of them here, if you *knew* too much... they wouldn’t mind just... letting the entire town die. To keep it under wraps. It’s... why I didn’t give you the files in the first place.”

“That’s it,” Dad shouts, “After this, I’m turning Hawkins into an anarchist collective.”

“So they... were going... to kill... *everyone*... because of *us*?” Mike shrieks, “They’re not *helping* the town *because of us*?”

“Mike, you have to stay calm –“

“*Fuck* calm! *Fuck* it!” Mike screams, “*Fuck* it, *fuck* it, *fuck* it, *fuck* it, *fuck* it, *fuck* it, *fuck* it, *FUCK IT* –“

“Mike!”

“Mike, please!”

“Stop –“

“You’re scaring everyone –“

“Mike,” you beg, “Mike, please –“

Mike collapses to the ground, holding his face in his hands, and when he pulls his hands away you see blood on them –

The blood is seeping from his eyes.

You scream in horror, falling back on the ground, the snow enveloping you.

“Jane –“

“Jane, no –“

“Jane, stay calm, *stay calm* –“

You scream and suddenly your brain is plunged into the inky mess, the not-void, the sludge, and you can barely breathe, you think you’re screaming but you’re just –

Trapped –

Like you’re sinking, sinking

Down, down, down, down

Down –

You hear people call for you

You touch your ears and nose and eyes and feel blood leaking from them

So much blood

Too much sticky, sticky blood

Wet and warm and slow down your face

And you cry but you can't get any real sounds out

You feel like you're choking

Choking on

Sludge

Choking on

Blood

Choking on

Air

Choking –

Choking –

Chok

Ch –

c –

You don't know how much time passes, really.

The only thing you know is when

You open your eyes

Again

Everyone is screaming –

Though you can barely hear, because your ears are ringing

And even though you can barely see

Because your eyes were *just* leaking blood

You see, in front of you

Mike, standing, looking in horror, standing as though ready to run

And a giant, gaping, wide, black

Infinitely black

Hole

In

The

Universe

In front of you

You barely manage a scream as the smoke starts to billow out into the air, filling it up, choking the sky

And your scream has only just left your lips when the demo-dogs start running into the field.

Notes for the Chapter:

NHYEHEHEHEHHHEHEHEEHEHEHEH I told y'all I was back for real this time

Leave me comments. Feed me. Feeeeeeed the machine of words so that you know what happens next as soon as possible :P

41. Black Wave

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for ridiculous amounts of gore, violence and horror

NOVEMBER 1 1987

MIKE LEVINSON

You regret a lot of things.

You've always regretted a lot of things.

That time you accidentally bumped your tooth on the edge of the bathtub and knocked it out and now you actually have a fake tooth but no one's noticed yet so you guess you're in the clear?

When you decided yeah, you'd take an aaliyah at synagogue, why not, and then forgot how to say the blessing of all things!

Oh right, and then there was that time you and Will decided yeah, it was a good day to go sledding, and it had *not* been a good day to go sledding.

And, of course, never forget that time you and Jane decided to order "adventurous" food from the pizza place and you regretted it for, oh, about a week.

Never mind, of course, the actual, big regrets.

Regretting trying to kill yourself.

Regretting not being able to see the warning signs in Jane, before she broke.

But this took the cake.

Why didn't you just *calm down*?

Why were you unable to calm down?

Why did your mind explode?

You don't remember much of it. You just remember... not being able to stay in control. And suddenly everything burning, exploding, vibrating out of your head until you couldn't feel, you couldn't control yourself –

And you opened your eyes, and the gate was back.

Now, of course, everyone had been running around, screaming, trying to escape the streams and streams of monsters, and whatever peace you had managed to pull together in the center of town was entirely destroyed. You don't know how many people have died.

You don't want to *think* about how many people have died.

It wasn't just Demo-Dogs, with their flower-shaped faces. It was also demo creatures of the air – large ones with bodies like out of a Dungeons and Dragons game, their bodies huge and winged and with long clawed limbs. Small ones, too, with tiny flitting bodies, able to dive and attack your face at a moments notice. Human-shaped demogorgons were there too, running along side everything else, chasing humans, the fastest ones of all.

The sounds of screaming, ripping, tearing, *blood* –

Everywhere –

Everywhere –

Jane had woken up only seconds after you. You had grabbed her hand, and now you were both running –

Just running –

As fast as you can –

The town is still buried in snow but you force yourselves to keep moving, keep running, going, going, going, going –

“Mike!”

You turn around and look at Jane, who’s bleeding from her mouth, dribbles of slow red liquid dropping down.

“I... I can’t...”

You watch in horror, your heart practically stopping in your body, as she falls to the ground, coughing up blood.

“*JANE!*” you scream, tears flooding out of your eyes as you dive to the ground with her, the snow surrounding you all over. You reach out to her, but she’s passed out in the snow, not moving under your touch.

“Jane – no – no – Jane – no – Jane –“

It was too soon.

Too soon.

The battle had only just started.

If Jane was going to die, then she’d die at the end, sacrificing herself for everyone, for the town, for her family, for you.

Not at the beginning, not because you fucked up.

It wouldn’t make sense, right?

That’s not how stories go.

It wouldn’t feel right.

Nothing about this feels right.

And this isn’t a story.

This is real life.

And you know that real life doesn’t usually fit the form of a narrative.

You burst into more tears, falling into the snow, trying to hold Jane

up to you, wishing you knew what to do, what to do, what to do,
what to do –

Her chest is barely moving anymore –

You burst into even louder sobs –

“Mike!”

You look up and see Wiconi diving towards you, pulling Jane into her arms.

“Wic –“

“SHUT UP I’M *WORKING* –“

You reach out for Jane and grab her hand, as Wiconi holds Jane tightly in her arms, snow billowing up around you three, practically enveloping you all. You wish you knew what was happening, but all you can see is Jane practically glowing in Wiconi’s arms, and blood pouring to of Wiconi’s nose and eyes and ears. She is holding onto Jane for dear life, and tears mix with the blood from her eyes, and she’s shaking with the force of her – grief? Effort?

She’s shaking, and sobbing, and you are shaking, and sobbing, and it’s all too much –

Too much –

Again –

Always again –

Never free –

Never allowed to rest –

The sound of dozens of feet running in your direction fills your ears, and you turn around, shocked to see a crowd of demo... horses? Running towards you. You scream in shock and stand up, working on instinct –

Grab –

Throw –

You don't throw them anywhere you can see, of course.

You throw them into the future.

And you collapse onto the ground, holding your face in your hands as Wiconi continues to squeeze Jane.

You wish you could stop crying.

Your tears are a mixture of blood and... tears and you wish that they weren't like that and like everything didn't feel so *sticky*.

Thunk

You look up and see Wiconi pass out into the snow, her head cushioned with the stuff as she splay out. Blood is everywhere on her, but Jane is sitting up, crying heavily.

“Wic – Wiconi – Wiconi –“

You grab onto Jane and hold her tightly, unable to stop yourself. Jane holds you back, squeezing you hard, her blood still wet on your face and hands and clothes thanks to the snow.

“Wiconi –“ Jane gasps out, “We have to –“

You reach for her pulse and feel it beat against your fingers, so you lift up the woman, barely able to hold onto her. Jane reaches with you and helps you lift, and the two of you take off running through the snow, holding Wiconi up and ducking into the nearest building.

Many people are holed up here, panicking and freaking out as monsters try to get in through the windows and doors. You realize, as you look around, that you're in in the middle school.

Well isn't that some sort of fucking karmic punishment right there.

Jane gently places Wiconi on the floor as you try to warm her with

blankets and supplies people are getting out, but you know there isn't much you can do. She just has to get her strength back.

"Mike?"

You look up at Jane, and she looks at you, her face caked in blood.

It all makes you want to vomit.

"What if she..."

"She won't."

"But –"

"She *won't*. She's strong."

"Okay."

She bursts into tears, and you hold her tightly against you, unable to stop yourself from trying to comfort her. She cries into your shoulder, and you rub her back, but you can hear the screams of people outside – who knows how many are your friends – and you know you need to get energy.

"Come on," you murmur, "Let's go."

"Go... *where*? I don't want to leave her –"

"She needs to rest up and get her strength back. We can't do much for her, especially while she's passed out. She's warm, and this place has plenty of people. But *we* need to get our energy up."

You hear a particularly bone-chilling scream from outside and shiver.

"They need us."

Jane nods, holding on to your arms tightly, and you both walk quietly through the halls, slipping into the cafeteria. It's freezing in this room, but you scurry forward together to where the food is kept. Jane starts pulling out all the pudding cups she can, even though the fridge has been off for a week, smelling them for rot and proceeding

to eat them in the cafeteria, on a bench, where no one is around.

You can't help but feel like you're twelve again.

And like things are going to just keep getting worse.

This is all very, very, very wrong.

"I need sugar," Jane says.

"I wasn't questioning –"

"Good."

Jane looks up at you and bursts into tears, and you just hold onto her, eating with her and trying to sooth her. But you can't stop hearing the sounds of screaming outside, and no amount of soothing is going to be able to take away the effects of that.

"What do we do?"

"We close it again."

"That's not good enough."

You stare at her as she stares at you, wiping away the caked on blood from her face, along with her tears.

"We have to kill him."

"H... *How?*" you whisper.

"I don't know, but we *have* to figure it out," Jane says, "We aren't safe until he's gone."

You nod, reaching out and stroking her hair out of her face, wishing you could stop all this, all of it, and keep her safe.

"I can't lose you," you whisper hoarsely.

"Mike," Jane snaps, "I can't lose you either. But we have to save everyone. *We* do. Because we have the powers to stop him."

You nod, but you can't help but sob more, falling into her arms and crying against her shoulder. She holds onto you tightly, and you try to take a second to breathe, but you can't seem to do so in any sort of reliable fashion.

"Come on, Mike," Jane whispers, "Come on."

"Come on – what?"

"Breathe in, and out."

"But –"

"Just breathe, for me?"

You do so, breathing in and out, Jane reaching out and gently holding onto your face. You smile at her, weakly, but the smile's there, and she smiles back at you.

"We're going to finish him off," she whispers softly.

"Yes," you agree.

"And we're going to be free."

"Yes."

"And when we're free..."

"Yes...?"

"We'll go on that trip."

"Right," you say.

Those words feel like years ago.

They were two days ago.

Not even, really.

"I think we should go somewhere warm."

You let out a choked laugh.

“Warm?”

“Yeah. Like LA, like you said, or maybe Florida, or something.”

“And do what?”

“Whatever we want,” Jane murmurs.

You lean in and kiss her, in the same spot as your first kiss, really, and you can’t help the feelings flipping through your chest.

“Let’s go check on Wiconi,” Jane whispers, and you nod, the two of you walking together quietly through the halls.

The front area is more full now, with people hurt and shaken huddling up together. You step through them, walking back over to where Wiconi is lying down, finding her sitting up and holding her head in her hands.

“Oh, good,” she says upon seeing you both, but her voice is hoarse and scratchy, “It worked.”

“Yes,” Jane whispers, “Thank you.”

They look at each other for a long time, before Wiconi pulls Jane into her arms, and they hug each other tightly. You watch, trying to stop yourself from crying more, frankly because you can’t afford to lose any more water.

“I thought I’d lost you, little sister,” Wiconi whispers.

“I thought I’d lost *you*, big sister,” Jane sobs.

“Well I’m still here.”

“I’m still here too.”

“Can’t get rid of me *that* easily!”

Jane chokes out a laugh.

“You’re still tired though,” you murmur, “Too tired.”

“You’re right,” Wiconi agrees, “I need to rest up. But you guys need to too.”

“We need to find out what’s happening with everyone else,” Jane whispers, “Where – they went –“

“Right,” Wiconi murmurs, “I... well... clearly our powers are working again.”

She gestures to Jane.

“Seeing as you’re alive.”

Jane frowns.

“Right...”

“What I’m saying is,” Wiconi takes a deep breath, “Maybe the psychic phone lines are working again, too?”

“Maybe the Mind Flayer thinks he doesn’t have to fuck with our powers anymore,” you say grimly.

“Regardless, things are easier now, powers-wise. We could try to reach out to the party members. You especially, Jane.”

Jane nods, and starts to close her eyes, sitting there with you all.

“Should we tell them to come here?” you ask softly.

“Yes,” Wiconi agrees, “Not least because I don’t want to move.”

Jane nods and focuses, and you try to close your eyes and reach out too, but you’ve never really been good at this with anyone but Jane, even though you’re on the psychic field with everyone else, and you eventually give up, as useless as you are –

No.

You are not useless.

Stop that.

You stand up and look outside.

You immediately wish you hadn't.

Corpses of people from all over town litter the ground. Blood is bouncing against the snow, only starting to seep through after long periods of time, the effect creating rivers of blood against ice and snow. There's also black blood from the demo-monsters, seeping deeper into the snow, just as cold, not blocked by temperature differences. People are fleeing, into buildings, into houses, into bomb shelters.

Finally, the cold war, the nuclear arms race, the constant threat of total annihilation from human forces instead of supernatural ones, that terrible thing you just have forgotten about at this point, is good for *something*.

You watch as a group of demo-somethings – horses? *Bears*? Some sort of large animal with a wide gaping flower mouth just running and screaming – chases a group of teenagers, kids *from your school*, fuck, even some kids who have bullied you in the past, and they're being chased, and you watch in horror as the monster descends onto them, tackling one of the kids onto the snow, and rips the boy apart, tearing limb and intestines from him.

You scream.

People start to look out the window with you, and they start screaming.

The demo-bear turns, and faces the school.

"Shit!" you shout, as the monster runs towards the door, trying to knock it down. You throw your weight against it, holding the door aloft, but the monster is stronger than you, and you know you won't be able to hold up the door forever –"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHRGH!"

You look in shock as Jane stands up, holds up her hand, and sends

the monster flying. It dissipates into smoke, and between that and the fact that you're in the middle school, you feel as though you've been transported in time.

Time.

Jane looks at you as you walk around her, frowning, concentrating, *thinking*.

Come on, Mike, *think!*

"Mike... what are you –"

"I'm thinking, Jane, I have an idea."

"Better think of it fast, kid," Wiconi groans, looking outside as more monsters start to approach the building, "They know you're here."

You grunt angrily and focus more.

It burns against your brain.

Every inch of you is in pain.

You scream with the force of it, and Jane holds both of her hands up, to keep the monsters from coming inside.

And you scream and scream and scream and scream to release the pain, to keep going, to keep *forcing* yourself to keep going –

Go, go, go, go, go –

You're so focused you stop noticing the screaming, the people around you, the monsters, even the blood –

Stop –

And everything is still.

Well, not everything.

The people around you are freaking out, still, even more now, arguably.

Jane is looking at you in shock.

Wiconi is cheering and bouncing in her seat.

And outside, all the monsters are held completely, utterly still.

You immediately feel faint.

You barely can stand up.

“Mike – *Mike!*” Jane shouts, and she runs over and holds you, as you keep holding up your hand, keep the monsters frozen in time.

“How long can you keep this up?” Wiconi asks.

“I... don’t...”

You can’t get the words out.

You need to use every ounce of energy you have to keep their time stopped.

“He won’t be able to keep going for long,” Jane whispers, “We have to get him energy, and do something with this time he’s given us.”

She has tears streaming down her face.

You grunt and pull every ounce of energy you have from your cells.

“Okay – uh – okay –“

“Wait – look – “

People outside are already using the extra time to run, escape, flee into buildings. Fewer and fewer people are left out in the snow. You can see the whole town pretty clearly from the school, and when you’re satisfied that everyone is inside and safe, you let go.

The monsters start looking around, but slower now, because the carnage has been halted.

And you pass out, letting the feeling of Jane’s arms around you comfort you into sleep.

You wake up later, and it's still dark outside – too dark outside. Dark and it feels weird. It's probably late enough, now, for it to be daytime... right?

Jane is still holding you, but from behind, her body curled around yours. It makes your heart pound faster in your chest, but you sit up and look around. She is sleeping, as is Wiconi. Your eyes widen in shock – you're not in the school anymore.

You're in Hopper's cabin.

And all of you are crowded in here.

"This seems like a mistake," you whisper quietly, sitting up and looking around.

"Shit – Mike! Mike's awake!"

Dustin grins at you, running over and giving you a hug. Everyone else begins to stir, and you flush with embarrassment.

"How... long was I out?" you ask quietly.

"I dunno man, ten hours. It's supposed to be the morning right now," Dustin frowns.

Jane sits up and looks at you, smiling a little bit. You lean in, hold her cheek against your hand, and kiss her; taking joy in the fact that you have been blessed with a second of peace.

"Good job, kid."

You look up at Hopper in shock. He's covered in blood, same as most of you, really, and limping towards you.

"Pausing those monsters – I think you saved real lives, last night."

You nod, tears leaking from your eyes.

"Mike, please don't blame yourself for the gate opening," Dustin begs.

"You neither, Jane," Lucas agrees tiredly.

"It was inevitable, and not your fault," Renee throws in, "What we have to do now is figure out a plan."

You groan quietly, holding your head in your hands. Jane wraps her arms around you, squeezing tightly again.

"From what I can tell, most of the town is inside various shelters and buildings, keeping safe. But they won't be safe there for long," Hopper pauses, "They'll run out of food and water soon enough, and those monsters could get in anywhere."

"They want us," you mutter quietly.

"You don't know –"

"Yes, we do, Dad," Jane says firmly, "When they realized Mike was in the school, they started trying to break the doors down. They want to take us out first, that's what they're here to do."

"Okay," Hopper sighs.

"So we shouldn't stay in one place for too long, right?" Max asks.

"No, we shouldn't," Bubbe agrees tiredly.

"You and David should go somewhere and rest," Hopper insists, "Sisel, I can't justify you –"

"Justify me *what*, James?"

Hopper steps back, his eyes widening.

"Go on, spit it out. Spit it out how you don't believe David and I can hold our own."

"Ima, we do *not* have time for this," Mom groans, "Jim, what do you want us to do?"

"We should evacuate the town," Wiconi whispers.

"Yes," you agree, "We have to get everyone out."

"How can we *do that* without those monsters attacking?" Lucas

shouts.

“We could use Mike’s apparent ability to selectively stop time again –“

“It nearly killed him,” Wiconi says, “We’d need to... tell everyone in the town to do exactly as we say, as quickly as possib –“

She turns and looks at Rico.

“Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no –“

“Oh yes.”

“People *hate* having someone in their head –“

“Look, Rico,” Will murmurs, “I don’t think maintaining secrecy is our big issue right now.”

Rico sighs tiredly.

“Okay.”

“But what will we *tell* them?” Hopper demands.

Renee is pacing the room, Doctor Owens doing circles around her in his own pacing. It’s too small for *anyone* to pace, much less *them*, so they keep crowding into each other.

“We have to evacuate them,” Renee says aloud, her voice strained.

“Yes, we do.”

“So we use transports?”

“How? We only have a limited window –“

“Don’t suppose you have any helicopters, doc –“

“Sadly, I do not.”

“You know, I could raise –“

“Please, Mpilo, don’t raise an army of the undead. *Please.*”

“It would help us though!”

“I don’t doubt it, but we have to focus on getting people out.”

“Wiconi... keeps healing Mike? While he keeps everything paused?”
Jane suggests quietly.

“Yes, and the moment we’re done they’re *both* out of it, when we might need them to fight *against* those things,” Joyce groans.

“But we don’t have a lot in terms of resources to fight, here –“

“No, we don’t, and I don’t know what to do –“

“We don’t have a lot of time to bicker about this,” you snap weakly,
“If I have to stop them again, I’ll do it –“

“We’re not risking your life for this, kid –“

“What if we just tried to call the government? Emergency rescue?
Something?” Lucas begs.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Sinclair, just...” Doctor Owens sighs, “But I don’t think we’re going to have much luck in any of the proper channels.”

“For *fuck’s* sake!” Jane screams.

“I know –“

“All these innocent people are going to *die* –“

“We’ll figure something out!”

“We have *no plan! No resources!*”

“We have resources,” Joyce says slowly, frowning, “We have us.”

“We have... what?”

“We don’t have enough time to get everyone out. But we know that

those... *monsters*... are after us. At the very least, they're after Jane and Mike."

You look at Joyce, your eyes widening.

"No, no, no, no, *no*. You are *not* using *my grandchildren as bait!*"
Zayde screams.

"She isn't *using* us as bait," you say softly, "We're *volunteering*."

Jane nods rapidly next to you.

"No, you're doing *no* such thing, you're *sixteen* –"

"We're sixteen, and we have a job to do," Jane says firmly.

"Mrs... Hopper... Byers... Joyce is right," you say, "We need to draw those monsters out of town, or at least, far away enough for people to get away."

"Do you think you'd have to go far?" Will asks.

"No," Jane responds, glaring a little, though not at Will, "That bastard will want to kill me as soon as possible."

Hopper makes a choked sound. You all look at him in shock, and he leaves the room, slipping into another.

"So we go to one end of the town – whichever end is coldest, snowiest, whatever. He'd want to be there anyway," Jane continues, her voice softer now, "Then, people he doesn't want to take down – I don't know, maybe the other psychics or something – he doesn't know them well yet –"

"He knows us enough," Renee sighs, "He's been stopping our powers –"

"Well, *someone*, goes and gathers up all the people of the town. Rico tells them to come. They're brought out, like, like..."

"Like some sort of exodus," you whisper.

“Yes,” Jane looks at you, her face breaking, “Yes.”

“This is *insane!*”

“This is our only shot,” you mutter, “Let us take it.”

“Well you aren’t fighting *alone* –“

“Of course not,” Jane says, “We’ll fight with whoever *isn’t* on the exodus-leading-team.”

Your mom lets out a sob, going into the other room with Hopper.

“Mom, Holly, and whoever wants to sit out, should go to the Byers’ house –“

“Holly’s already there, watching the birds –“

“Oh thank God,” Jane sighs.

“I’ll go too,” Maria whispers.

“That’s probably for the best. Rico, you should go with her, so you can be ready to go for telling everyone, and not in obvious danger –“

“I’ll go with him,” Will offers.

“Great,” Renee says, nodding.

“Who should be on the exodus team?”

“I’ll go,” Zayde says.

“Me too,” Bubbe agrees.

“I’ll go, obviously,” Renee continues.

“I’ll help, too,” Doctor Owens says.

“Right, I’m on this one,” Steve confirms.

“I think that should be good enough...?” Renee pauses, looking back to where Hopper was.

"I'm fighting with the kids," Hopper says firmly.

"Me too," Lucas agrees.

"Me three," Dustin says.

"You are all lost without me," Max jokes.

"I'll help too," Joyce sighs, "You should have *some* adult supervision."

"I *will* raise an army and we *will* win," Mpilo says firmly.

"You are all lost without my healing, so I'll be there," Wiconi laughs.

"This is serious, Wic –"

"I *know* it's serious, Renee, I'm trying to lighten the *fucking mood* as we send *sixteen-year-olds* off to their deaths like it's a regular fucking Tuesday –"

"I'm not dying if I can help it," you mutter.

"Me neither," Jane agrees.

"That's my boy," Mom murmurs, walking back over to you and hugging you tightly.

"Okay," Jane sighs deeply, "Let's... let's eat up. Get energized. We can't afford to lose a *moment*."

"Get energized with... what?" you ask tiredly.

"Will still have food from the camp," Renee murmurs, "I brought it here when I fled."

You and Jane dig into the food, eating it heartily and rapidly – chips and bread and stew. It is, of course, more than you're used to eating at any one time, but you're so *hungry* that you don't even mind. Jane eats hurriedly herself, her eyes only really focusing on her food. You watch her, wishing to memorize every action, just in case...

No.

Not thinking about that.

Only positive thoughts.

“So what do we do now? Just go out there?” Jane asks, “I’m ready to do this.”

“No, we need to coordinate,” Hopper says firmly.

“I think a few of the distractor group should head out, draw away the monsters,” Lucas begins, pacing around the room, “To keep them away from the people running to the Byers’ house. Then, when the telepathy group reaches the Byers’, they will let the people remaining in the cabin know to move out. The rest of the distractor group will then head out to distract more monsters and make the Mind Flayer confused. Then, the people will escape, while the monsters are distracted, and the exodus team will help lead them out of buildings.”

“What’s stopping them from realizing what’s happening?” Hopper asks.

“Do you think they’ll care? Yeah the Mind Flayer wants to eliminate the world, but it’s calm outside right now *because* he has no idea where we are,” Rico mutters, “The monsters are just... roaming around the town.”

“That’s what you see in peoples’ heads?”

Rico nods mutely.

“Then Jane *or* Mike should go out first, so that they get *really* distracted when the other leaves the house,” Lucas points out.

“I’m not leaving her,” you say firmly.

Jane glares at you.

“That is the best idea, Mike.”

“But –“

“No buts. We should distract him in two waves.”

You sigh, heavily.

“Then I should go out first. The bigger distraction should be when we’re trying to free the people.”

“But –“

“No buts.”

You stare at each other for a long time, identical expressions mirroring back and forth, faces etched with longing, fear, despair.

“That’s enough of that,” Hopper says gruffly, “Let’s decide who’s going out first. Mike?”

You nod.

“Alright, who else?”

“I’m in,” Max says.

“I’ll go too,” Dustin continues.

“But –“

“Lucas, you should really be here to coordinate until it’s time for all distractors to leave, since it’s your plan,” Dustin sighs. Lucas nods, looking worried.

“I’ll go too, Lucas. Don’t worry, Max will be safe with me,” Mpilo reassures.

“I can take care of *myself* –“

“Oh, I know. But you know how male brains work,” Mpilo says, “We are too egotistical.”

Max’s face bursts into a wide smile.

“Oh, I *know*.”

“I’ll go out in the first group, too,” Joyce says, already grabbing flame throwers and guns and putting them on her shoulders, “I have some

pent up anger to release.”

“This is enough talking,” you say, your heart in your throat, “We have lives to save.”

“Agreed,” Jane whispers.

You put on more warm clothing, and grab a cannon-like gun from the closet, though you’re not sure how much help it’ll actually be. Max slings two giant guns over her shoulders, crossing on her back. Dustin grabs a flamethrower, nodding at you as he does so.

“Wait wait wait – what the fuck – what are you kids *carrying* –“

“Guns, how else are we going to fight these things?” Dustin asks seriously.

Hopper groans.

“I taught them how to use them last winter,” Wiconi mutters.

Hopper glares at her for a long moment.

Mpilo just eats carbs.

“How... many people are you planning on raising from the dead?” you ask, your voice a squeak.

“As many as it takes.”

You nod, squeezing your eyes shut for a minute, trying to not imagine it – imagine any of it – before walking down the hallway. Jane grabs your arm, and pulls you back, looking at you desperately.

“Don’t die,” she whispers.

“I won’t, I promise,” you murmur, leaning in and kissing her, “I love you..”

“I love you,” she says, watching you as tears leak out of her eyes, and you have to tear yourself away, or else you’d honestly never leave.

So you lead the small group forward, walking slowly through the

woods, watching around you everywhere you go, the darkness of the sky necessitating lighting the way with the flashlight.

Which just makes you feel more and more vulnerable.

“Keep quiet, the longer we can keep them from finding us the better,” Dustin mutters so softly you barely hear him. You all nod, watching where you step, making sure to not crack a twig, the snow not as high up here in the woods, with all the canopy cover.

Everything is too quiet.

Chills are running up and down your arms, and *not* in a good way.

You want to cry or scream but you just keep walking –

Even though, for the first time in a long time, you seem to be sweating –

And your mind is running

Running

Running

And you can barely think

It's all just spinning around

How many people...

How...

How many have died

Because of *you*?

You hear something moving.

You whirl around on your heels.

An inky, black thing slithers through the trees.

It's trying to stay unnoticed.

Just like you.

But you've seen it.

You don't wait for the others to notice. You grab your gun, hold it up, and shoot.

The monster is flung back into the woods, screaming.

And you can hear other monsters start to run towards you –

Thousands of feet running through snow –

“GO!” Max screams, and you all run out, sprinting through the woods and back out to the snow. Out in the main part of the town, the snow is much too deep to keep running, but you tread through anyway, forcing yourself through the powder and looking around wildly. You feel stuck, trapped, you can't move forward, but you have to, so you run, run, run –

Monsters –

They are almost so thick they create a black wave of creatures of every size, every shape, every kind, every fear. Dustin immediately turns on the fire, it exploding in front of you, melting snow and frightening the monsters back. You roar with anger –

This monster –

This *asshole* –

Had killed people. Had killed people *you knew*. Your neighbors. Good and bad alike, but none of them deserved to *die*.

Definitely not like *that*.

And that didn't even *begin* to touch on what they'd done to you, to Jane, to Will, to your *family*.

You roar a second time and run forward, shooting the gun over and

over again, the kickback threatening to knock you off your balance, but you just keep shooting it. Inky black blood fills the remaining snow, oozing into it like oil, as Max manages to knock down one after the other, over and over again.

A demo-something, dog? Bird? Bear? *Something* dives at Dustin. He screams, using the fire to knock back the monster. The monster bites into his arm, sending human blood into the snow. It bounces off, heat meeting cold, red filling the air.

“NO!” Joyce screams, and she burns the creature alive, and then every new monster coming forward at the smell of blood. Dustin groans, holding onto his arm, blood seeping through his fingers, dripping, dripping, dripping...

“GO!” you roar, and Dustin ducks away, Max covering his escape, the two of them running into a nearby house. The monsters look to follow them, so you shoot at the monsters, roaring in anger, and fear, and desperation.

“YOU WANT ME, SO COME AFTER *ME!*” you scream. The monsters all turn to face you, mouths opening up in flower patterns, inching forward in the snow.

You pick up Dustin’s flamethrower from the ground, glaring around at all of these creatures.

Your heart is in your throat.

Your mind is going way, way too fast.

You can barely think.

But you hold up the weapons and shoot.

The monsters scream in pain, especially at the fire.

You take off running through the snow, it melting around you – was the Mind Flayer losing concentration? Was the fire warming up the whole area?

Regardless, you manage to make it through.

A black cloud seeps towards you before you even register it exists –

You scream again –

It envelopes around you –

You feel like you're choking –

You can barely breathe –

No –

No –

No –

You scream, louder now, focusing your mind, focusing, focusing, focusing –

The smoke is trapped in the past.

You, in the present, the future, going forward, fall to the ground.

You cry out in pain, barely able to hold it, but you grab your flamethrower, release the monster, and blow –

Blow –

Blow –

Blow –

The Mind Flayer – or whatever it is, a projection? Whatever – makes an unearthly sound, it chills you to the bone, but it slinks away, evaporates in the air.

You cough, the motion making your lungs feel like they're burning, too –

Everything, burning –

Burning and freezing –

You cry out and fall to the ground, face in the snow.

You know you can't sit for long.

Really, you can't rest at all.

You're too vulnerable.

Get up get up get up get up –

AHHHHHHHHH –

A sharp pain fills you up from your feet

You turn around and scream, at the top of your lungs, at the sight of a demo-dog, gnawing at your foot, the petals of its mouth enveloping every inch. Blood soaks into the snow, so deep red you want to faint. You try to kick it off, but you can barely feel your leg, and your world is spinning –

Spinning too much –

Too much –

Too much –

You shoot it down, but you can't move now.

You can't go anywhere.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck –

“COME ON!”

You look and see Mpilo is carrying you, running across the snow.

“But –“

“I’ve called Wiconi, you just *get out of the way*, get in hiding –“

“BUT –“

“NO ARGUMENTS, MIKHA’EL, IT’S NOT YOUR TIME TO DIE –“

You cry out in pain as you’re tossed into the same building Dustin ducked into, and you watch the window in fear as Mpilo goes back out into the snow.

Everything hurts so much you might pass out.

You know, again.

Dustin looks at you, his face white, his eyes almost glazed over.

Where was Wiconi?

Mpilo’s arms are at his sides, and you watch in horror as his arms go up higher, and higher, and higher, and suddenly –

Dozens –

No, hundreds –

No...

Thousands...

Of...

Of...

Of...

Zombies –

Swarm the square, swarm the town, swarm every inch.

Their skin is melting off their faces, revealing bone and rotting flesh. They have holes littered throughout their bodies, tattered clothes

they were buried in – modern, old, even native, a terrifying mix of all the people who had lived and died here. The smell that fills the air is overpowering, reaching your nose, making you gag. They shuffle slowly, not making a single sound, a silent onslaught of corpses.

Mpilo shouts, in a voice not his own, not his own at all, much too deep and angry and *alien*,

“GO. NOW.”

And the zombies shuffle forward, swarming the black, swarming the monsters, swarming –

Screaming –

Monsters against monsters –

Blood and more blood and flesh ripped away –

The snow black and red and grey and brown and every color *but* white –

The smell of death and decay filling your nose so thoroughly you gag and want to vomit –

The door opens and you scream, not sure what you want to see in front of you.

Wiconi dives towards you, closing the door rapidly behind her. You look at her in shock as she puts her hands on your foot, concentrating –

Warmth spreads throughout you, overwhelming you, pulling you back to the world.

Your mind feels clearer than you’ve ever felt it.

You take a deep breath and watch as she crawls away from you, putting her hands on Dustin, and Dustin glows a little as she works, and you just try to breathe –

In and out, in and out –

Have to –

Have to –

Have to go back out there...

Have to –

“Mike, *rest*,” Wiconi orders, before you can even reach the door.

“But –“

“But you didn’t have a foot five seconds ago, you have to calm the fuck down and let Mpilo take care of this.”

“How can people *leave* and *escape* if there are *zombies everywhere*?”

“The zombies won’t attack them –“

You groan, your head spinning.

This is...

Too much.

You think you’re starting to forget what the *absence* of blood smelled like...

“It’s so fucked up that he’s disturbing the dead,” Wiconi mutters under her breath, but she puts her head down against the floor, curling up into a ball of herself.

“Are you okay?” Dustin asks, his arm healed.

“Yeah, just gotta – gotta –“

WHAM!

You all look up and scream at the sight of a monster mauling a zombie mauling the monster, pressed against the window, limbs being torn from bodies, black blood everywhere, guts and rotted flesh strewn within it. The zombie falls, defeated, and the monster sees you all, immediately hissing in fury.

You all scream again.

The monster tries to crash open the door.

Another zombie grabs it, holding tight, mouth gaping open, rotting teeth falling out.

The zombie rips the monster limb from limb, leaving its corpse in the snow, before shambling away, slowly, leaving behind chunks of its own flesh.

“I’m. I’m going to faint,” Dustin whispers.

“No, kid, stay with me,” Wiconi orders.

“But –“

“We’ve got a long way to go before this mission is over, and we need *everyone*. Including you.”

Dustin looks at her for a long time.

“But –“

“Dustin,” you say firmly. He turns to you.

“We need you too,” you insist.

Dustin looks at you, nods, and gets up.

You cautiously approach the door, watching for monsters and zombies, before opening it, looking out at the carnage and immediately vomiting.

Too many smells.

Too many smells all at once.

“Come *on!*” Dustin shouts, dragging you forward, handing you back your gun.

Your hands are shaking, but you hold the gun high, aim for a Demogorgon, and shoot. The monster explodes with the impact, guts

strewn everywhere.

“I just got word!”

You see Mpilo running towards you, blood oozing down from a wound on his cheek, his eyes lit up despite it.

“They’ve all reached the Byers’ house safely!”

“They have?” Wiconi breathes.

“They have!”

You fall to your knees, breathing hard, tears leaking out of your eyes. You can’t help but breathe words of blessing, almost foreign to you, after so long in this hell.

“Mike, get up, I understand, but we have to keep fighting, so that the people can get out,” Max sighs.

You nod into the snow, the frozen water sending chills up and down your spine. Too many chills.

Max grabs your hand, helping you up, and immediately runs back into the fray, shooting left and right, almost without care. Her face is filled with so much anger, you almost fear for yourself.

But you just run out instead, continuing to shoot monsters down.

You grab one, hold it frozen in time, before sending half of it forward in time and half of it back – ripping it in two, black blood flitting between the times.

The energy of it makes you fall again, but you pull yourself up, stumbling forward to knock over a demo-dog with your gun, sending it flying backwards. You pull yourself together just fast enough to shoot it, the black muck hitting your face, stinging it with whatever the substance held. You grab clean snow – somehow, there was some left – and wipe it on your face, pulling the black goop away.

A roar escapes your lips.

You keep shooting, keep pausing, keep sending, keep fighting.

Energy is leaking out of you like a bad faucet, but you keep fighting anyway, because you honestly don't have another choice. You'll die either way.

You grab a monster in time, stop it, and rip it in half.

The second time, it doesn't drain as much.

You whirl around on your heels, watching for monsters each direction you look, shooting when you see one, your hair flipping around your head.

At least, you're starting to feel warm again.

Kind of.

It's not a very nice warmth.

It's the warmth of sweat, blood, activity everywhere. Too much.

"I am so *fucking sick* of this!" Joyce screams near you, kicking a monster away from her, butting another one in the head with her gun, "SICK! SICK! SICK!"

You stop a monster in its tracks and twist it in half.

You don't really want to talk. You just want these things *gone*.

And you're getting more and more desensitized to the walking corpses.

You look around and see Mpilo, standing on top of a building, continuing to guide the zombies, Wiconi next to him with a gun, shooting down each monster that tries to get too close.

"Eventually the bastard has to run out, *right?*" Max shouts, throwing away one gun and switching to another as she runs out of ammunition.

"You'd fucking *think!*" Dustin roars.

You grab the gun Max dropped and use it to whack away demo-birds, hitting them out of the sky, knocking them into trees. They splat into a mess of inky oil, but they still keep coming, small darts dive bombing you from the sky.

Dustin shoots up flames at them, burning them down, lighting the air with thick, thick smoke.

The smoke turns to their oily blood, dripping down onto your heads.

Max screams in pain, diving her head into the snow, and Dustin covers her, crying in pain from the blood touching his own scalp.

Your eyes are watering with pain, but you keep shooting anyway.

You can worry about the pain later –

“MIKE!”

You turn around and see Joyce running towards you, forcing your head down into the snow.

“Wha –“

“Your scalp was sizzling, Mike, for fuck’s sake –“

You groan, the relief of the snow making you cry in earnest, before jumping back up.

More monsters are swarming.

Too many more.

And the zombies are decreasing, decreasing, decreasing –

“Fuck,” Dustin groans.

“Shit,” Max whispers.

You grimace, picturing Jane’s face –

When the field in front of you explodes.

The explosion throws you all backwards, you landing in the snow, your body aching but otherwise unharmed. You scramble to your feet, stumbling forward, to see Hopper, Jane, and Lucas walking towards you, Hopper holding more small explosives in his hand, Jane already holding out her arm towards the beasts.

She stops for just one second, and everything left freezes in place, demo-birds in midair, demo-bears in midstep.

“Jim!” Joyce cries with relief, running to him.

“Come on, Joyce, we have to keep them here, you know what’s at stake –“

You stop paying attention, as you’ve run to Jane, and she kisses you, still focusing on pausing the monsters.

Wiconi and Mpilo jump down from the roof.

“So what do we do now?” Max asks, her hands shaking as she wipes blood from her forehead.

“We keep distracting until we get the all-clear. Can you raise any more zombies, Mpilo?” Lucas asks.

Mpilo sighs.

“I’m running out of corpses from close by. I’d have to leave town to get more right now.”

“Could you... I don’t know, raise dead animals?” Hopper asks desperately.

“I... could,” Mpilo frowns, “But I don’t have a lot of material to work with. Decay, you know.”

“Well, get whatever you can. We can’t afford to hold back.”

“I can’t hold them much longer,” Jane admits, looking at you desperately.

“Everyone, get ready.”

Everyone forms a circle, and you stand next to Jane, holding up your gun and glaring at the monsters, frozen in place.

“I’m going to release them in three,” Jane says.

You hear guns cocked, flamethrowers lit, monsters raised from the ground.

“Two –“

You brace yourself, gritting your teeth much too hard.

“One!”

The monsters start moving, running towards you all at lightening speeds. You immediately stop the ones coming too close, long enough for Jane to rip them in half.

And then you repeat again.

Zombie bears, bats, lizards, and birds surround you, no flesh remaining, just skeletons – even fossils – but able to knock the monsters out of the air.

Monsters and monsters fighting monsters and monsters.

A scream escapes your lips as you stop more coming to you and Jane.

The group is dispersing, now, individuals going forward somewhat to attack farther away demogorgons, and you turn to Jane, pausing monsters approaching you.

“Together?”

“Always,” Jane whispers, and you stand back to back, circling together as monsters approach you.

“I’m going to close my eyes –“

“Yes, tell me when they’re coming, and where from –“

“Definitely. Ready?”

“Ready!”

You close your eyes, and lodge yourself a few seconds in the future.

“Left! Dog!”

You hear a scream as a monster is destroyed.

“Right – bird swarm –“

The sound of a flamethrower, lighting up the night.

“Watch out –“

“Got it!”

You open your eyes briefly, seeing walls of corpses surrounding you both, monsters knocked down by Jane, her arms flying back and forth as she stops and kills them, instantly.

Behind what you see, you see in the future –

“DUCK!” you scream, and you both hit the snow as a large, demo-dragon flies above you, the weird reptilian behemoth landing and roaring. Your ears start ringing, but Jane drags you up, the two of you grabbing ahold of the monster.

“It’s too much –“ Jane cries.

“No, it’s not! You can do it!” you say.

Jane grunts –

Rips –

You can *feel* her ripping it –

And the monster explodes.

You shout and stop the muck and guck in its tracks, before it can hit you, and Jane sends it away, disappearing it into thin air.

She turns to you, and you can’t help but kiss her, even for a second.

You beam at each other, before turning back to the monsters, you shouting out where they'd come from, and her destroying them before they reach you.

Just keep going –

Just a little longer –

Just get the townspeople *out* –

Just save even, even, even one person –

One life –

“Jane, I can’t keep –“

“That’s okay, just fight with me!”

“Okay –“

You open your eyes again, holding your gun, Jane doing the same in the opposite direction. You keep pivoting around in a circle, shooting everywhere you see a monster, Jane occasionally still using her powers, but mostly just running out of steam.

“Look out!” Jane shouts, and you watch as a monster jumps at you, but she knocks it out of the air with her gun, the creature falling into the snow. You shoot it, your heart in your throat.

“Thank you –“

“Don’t mention it, stay focused!”

“I love you –“

“I love you!”

But you’re so tired, you’re worried you’ll pass out –

And everyone around you is also losing steam –

You wish you knew what was *happening* –

How long you had to *do* this –

So you keep shooting, and so does Jane, and you want to just sleep, sleep for a week, but there are too many of them –

Too many of them –

You can't keep doing this, you're going to run out of ammo –

Shoot, shoot, shoot, kill, kill, kill –

Black blood, black guts, black monsters, black death –

Too much, too smelly, too noisy, eyes watering –

Can't even think, can't even *breathe* –

Where was the Mind Flayer *getting all of these* –

How could he still be around there was enough fire in the clearing to burn down the town –

A swarm of demo-birds crowd around you, Jane screaming in terror besides you.

You scream too, horrified, closing your eyes, waiting, reaching out to grab Jane –

When the demo-birds bounce, bounce, bounce, bounce, bounce, off of a seemingly invisible surface above you. They crash into the snow, twitching against the ground, and Jane lights them on fire, her eyes wide in shock as you both look up.

In front of you stands Six – Eric – his hand held aloft, blood trickling down his nose. Behind him stand Tarek, Fumiko, Craig, Terry, and Kali.

Next to them, both holding up large guns, were Nancy and Jonathan.

They were all covered in snow, in blood – red and black – and dirt. Clothes torn, worn, clearly stretched out from days of journeying. Nancy's hairline is filled with blood, Jonathan's face scratched

beyond belief. Tarek, Fumiko, Eric, and Kali all have blood dripping from their noses. Craig and Terry are covered in scars and cuts and bruises.

You honestly think you're hallucinating.

How could they... How... why...

"Holy... shit..." Jane whispers.

"Come on," Fumiko shouts, "Don't give up now."

She throws you a new gun, and you grab it, grinning at her as they all join the fray, facing the monsters. At the sight of more of you, more psychics, the monsters start to retreat, running back in fear.

You watch in shock as the fire finally seems to be doing *something*, and they retreat, retreat, retreat, into the deep forest.

And you collapse to the ground, barely able to stay awake.

This isn't over.

It's just the beginning.

Notes for the Chapter:

HA HA bet you guys thought I was hiatusing again
well THINK AGAIN

In all seriousness I had Rosh Hashanah stuff, sorry about that :) Not sure if I'll finish the story by Yom Kippur next week so keep that in mind too.

Thank you all for your lovely comments!!! PLEASE keep them coming, especially as we reach the endgame here!!! I hope you all enjoy how this story is ending, how the final showdown is going, etc. I say nothing about what happens next. Y'all will just have to wait! Next chapter should be somewhat more calm than this one, but I make no overall promises

Love you all, and I hope you all had a great week,
whether observing the new year or not :) Shanah
Tovah!

42. Healing

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Descriptions of past trauma & abuse

NOVEMBER 2 1987

JANE HOPPER

You were fairly sure, before now, that you knew what exhaustion felt like.

Except, clearly, you didn't.

Because, no matter *how* confused you were at the sudden appearance of most of the rest of your siblings, you couldn't ask them, you couldn't question them, you couldn't...

Deal with them.

You *had* to sleep.

So you crawled into a sleeping bag next to the birds, watched them chitter and chatter, felt Mike wrap his arms around you, and tried to sleep.

And now you open your eyes, light peaking through the window, your entire body feeling as though it's been hit by a truck. Everyone is sleeping around you, in various groupings – some on their own, some with others, sometimes romantically, sometimes platonically. You see Steve surrounded by Nancy and Jonathan, all three of them holding onto each other tightly. Joyce and Dad are clearly awake, their heads together, whispers moving between them. Maria is held tightly by Mpilo, who appears to have been comforting her, before they fell asleep. Bubbe and Zayde get the actual bed, out of sight from everyone else. In another corner, Kali is huddled up with Fumiko.

It hurts a little to look at them.

“Hey,” Mike whispers in your ear, his voice tickling it softly, your heart leaping in your chest.

“Hey,” you whisper back, reaching over to his arm and touching it, “How are you?”

“I’m alright,” Mike pauses, “Just.... Not looking forward to another day of this.”

You nod, sighing.

It wasn’t over.

Not yet.

“Well, let’s eat,” you mutter softly, pulling yourself up and stumbling into the kitchen. No one else is awake yet, and you enjoy the silence as you pour out cereal into a bowl. Mike just watches you, his facial expression almost unreadable.

“What?” you ask softly.

“I don’t know,” Mike admits, reaching out for your hand, “It’s just... I...”

You tilt your head to the side, and realize exactly *how* much every inch of your body actually aches. Every little motion sends pain shooting through you, and you grit your teeth in agony.

“How are we supposed to get through so many more days of this?” you mutter.

“I don’t know,” Mike repeats.

You let out a long, slow sigh, and nod. Mike reaches out and holds your arm, rubbing it with his thumb. It’s still too cold – no service has been turned back on whatsoever – and you walk over to him and dive into his arms to keep warm. He’s not much warmer himself, and all it does is make you feel at least a little happier.

“Hey,” Mike whispers. You look up at him and he kisses your nose.

“They came back, didn’t they?”

You nod, smiling weakly.

“They did, yeah...”

“They realized you were right, saw we were in trouble, and came,” he emphasizes, stroking hair out of your face.

“They did...” you say again, pausing and frowning, “But isn’t it too late?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mike, people have died. A lot of people.”

The words escape your throat in a hoarse whisper, the pain of the bodies, the blood, the screaming, the fear grating against your teeth. A shiver trails up your spine.

“And it’s because of us.”

Mike swallows, looking at you for a long time.

“Jane?”

You nod, biting your lip.

“It’s because of the Mind Flayer.”

You nod, looking down at your shoes.

“It’s because of what *he* did. To you. To us. To the town.”

You nod again.

“It’s because of those idiots at the Department of Energy.”

You let out a long, shaking sigh.

“Because of how *they pushed you*, how they pushed everyone, and rather than handle it responsibly, let it get out of control.”

You nod a third time.

“You didn’t want *any* of this to happen. You didn’t *make* any of this happen. You were controlled and abused and manipulated and pushed until you broke. And you should never, *ever*, blame yourself for that.”

You look up at him, tears streaming out of your eyes. He reaches out and cups your cheeks with both of his hands, wiping away the tears with his thumbs.

“I think you know this,” Mike whispers.

“But –“

“And I know it’s hard to remember. I have trouble too. But if we’re going to get through this, and help to save people, we have to try.”

The mind swirl that had returned and tried to take over calms, and you throw your arms around Mike, squeezing him for dear life. Your mind returns to normal, and you breathe easily.

“You’re right,” you whisper.

“I am – wait – I am?” Mike asks, frowning.

“Yeah,” you snort, “You are. We’ve been through so much.”

He nods, stroking more hair out of your face.

“And... we probably will go through much more, even if we get out of this.”

Mike frowns and nods again.

“But... we can do this. We can finish this *asshole*, and then... I don’t know what, but we’ll do *something* to celebrate,” you laugh.

“I’m sorry we’ll probably carry all of this for the rest of our lives,” Mike sighs.

“It’s alright,” you hug him tightly, “I don’t mind, since all this crap

brought me to you.”

Mike laughs a little, “Yeah... me too.”

You stand there in each other’s arms for a little while longer, just holding onto each other. You listen to the sound of his heart beating, hoping to memorize it, the thumping etched into your brain, just in case –

“Hey.”

You whirl around, and see Kali standing in the doorframe, frowning at you. She tucks her hair behind her ear, and looks down at her shoes immediately after your eyes meet.

“Hey,” you whisper.

Mike frowns loudly next to you.

“Can we... talk?”

You nod, and you follow her out, going down the hall together to another room, closing the door behind you and standing far too close together – too little space, too little space to work in.

“Hey,” Kali repeats.

“Hey,” you mutter.

“So... um...”

“What do you want to talk about, Kali?” you sigh, unable to stop yourself.

It’s just all been too much.

Too much.

“I’m sorry.”

Your head snaps up, and you watch her for a long time, just frowning.

“You’re... sorry?”

“Yeah,” Kali sighs again, “I’m sorry.”

You watch each other for another long minute, silence hanging in the air between you.

“Is that... it?”

“No, it’s not,” Kali takes in another breath, “I’m sorry for trying to manipulate you. For trying to warp your reality. For *actually* warping your reality. And I’m sorry that I... insisted that I was in the right. I’m sorry that I hurt you.”

You swallow, your mouth feeling weirdly like cotton.

“And... I know you can’t forgive me. I don’t *want* you to forgive me. But I just want you to know that I... I mean it. I’m sorry. If I could do it over again... I would have handled our meeting so differently. I’m sorry I can’t redo it,” Kali finishes, her breath coming out in a woosh, your mouth still so dry you couldn’t swallow anymore.

“I...”

You can’t get any words out.

Your brain just spins from... from...

Everything.

From everything.

“Thank you,” you finally murmur, “Thank you for apologizing. And... wishing that you hadn’t done it.”

“Yeah,” Kali says, “I really... really do.”

You watch each other for a long minute. She looks so different.

Softer, even.

Without all the makeup, her hair neatly tied into braids.

You wonder if it is on purpose.

“I wonder what my life would be like now,” you manage to choke out, “If you hadn’t... if we hadn’t...”

“Yeah,” Kali sighs, “I wonder that too.”

You kick up dust on the floor of the cabin.

“I really fucked it all up... didn’t I?”

You look at Kali for a minute, trying to decide how you want to answer, trying to figure out how to cut through the fog of your brain.

“Yeah... you did,” you finally mutter.

Kali sighs.

“Thanks for being honest.”

“Yeah,” you repeat, “I’m... sorry. That I can’t say more. Than that. But I don’t want to lie to you, and... sugar-coat... the pain I still feel. From all that.”

“No, no,” Kali says, “I wouldn’t want you to.”

“But... thank you. Again,” you say.

“I had to,” Kali whispers.

You nod one more time, and walk back into the kitchen. Mike greets you with a smile, though it’s only slight, and you walk up to him to hug him tightly around the waist.

“Uh...”

You look up to see Dustin hovering awkwardly in the doorway.

“Hey, Kali,” he finally says, frowning.

“Hey, Dustin,” Kali whispers, “How are you?”

“Oh, you know. Surviving the apocalypse. All that kind of fun stuff,”

Dustin shrugs.

“Yeah,” Kali snorts, “Me too.”

“My favorite part is definitely how many times I’ve nearly died,” Dustin continues, “I mean, I don’t know about you guys, but blood? One hundred percent desensitized.”

“I would have to go with the snow, personally,” Kali snorts, “Cold doesn’t bother me anymore.”

“It never bothered me at all, get on my level,” Dustin jokes.

“Oh, you *wish*.”

“What... is happening?” Mike whispers in your ear. You shrug, as confused as he.

“Well I’m going to go try to sleep more,” Kali says, frowning slightly, “I’m... too tired after all the hiking.”

“Yeah, good plan,” Dustin says quickly. Kali walks out of the room, leaving you and Mike staring at Dustin incredulously.

Dustin looks at you both, opens his mouth to speak, changes his mind, and walks out of the room as well.

“I don’t know what’s going on anymore,” you mutter angrily.

“I never knew what was going on, so, we’re on the same page at last,” Mike sighs.

“I’m so happy for that,” you snort. Mike kisses the top of your head, sighing into your hair.

“I’m glad we’re both here,” he whispers quietly.

You nod, your hands trembling slightly as you reach for his hand. Everything hits you, and you take a deep breath, resting your forehead against the counter.

“Me too.”

Mike leans forward with you, holding his arms tightly around you, and keeping you steady and upright as you breathe in –

And out –

In –

And out –

In –

And out –

Many moments pass of that, your mind blurring in and out of active thought, as you just hold onto Mike, trying to find a second of clarity in the mess of memories of snow and blood and guts and screams.

It's all so overwhelming.

How would you keep going?

How were you going to solve this?

Lucky for you, the smell of Mike keeps you calm.

Just a few more moments...

"So what's the plan now?" Will asks, walking into the room, shattering the ounces of peace you've managed to snatch. You both look up, you frowning at Will, as your mind draws a complete blank.

"I... don't know."

"Well, we should figure it out," Will sighs, "I... Um..."

"What?" Mike asks softly.

"I'm not sure... we can do what we did all those years ago..."

"You're right," you whisper, "We can't just close the gate."

Will nods rapidly, "We have to kill the monster."

“If we don’t, he’ll just keep trying to get in,” you agree.

“How are we going to tell that to everyone?” Mike groans, “Without everyone flipping the fuck out?”

“Everyone’s going to flip the fuck out,” you mutter, “They’ll have to get over it.”

“We really don’t have another choice,” Will agrees.

“Great,” Mike grunts, “Well, let’s wait for everyone to wake up again, I guess...”

“I hate waiting,” you mutter, “All this sitting around... keep being left with my thoughts... annoying.”

“Agreed,” Will sighs.

“Well, then, let’s talk about something and try to get our minds off of how terrible this is,” Mike says, stroking your hair away from your cheek, “I mean, we can’t fight the Mind Flayer if we’re all depressed as shit.”

“No, we can’t,” you snort.

“What do you have in mind?” Will asks.

“Okay, I have a question, Will, and you don’t have to answer, but I’d like to know the answer, so if you find that you *can* get yourself to answer –“

“Spit it out, Mike!”

“Okay, okay – is Rico your boyfriend?” Mike finally asks.

“Oh my God,” you mutter, “You can’t just ask him –“

“Yes,” Will whispers, “Yeah, he is.”

“Dude!” Mike cheers, “That’s awesome –“

“But please, don’t spread it around very much,” Will mumbles, “Rico doesn’t want people to know... he’s not... he’s not confident that we

have such a good support system, you know?”

“Oh geez, I’m sorry,” Mike mumbles.

“We get it,” you reassure, “Don’t worry, Will.”

“Thanks,” Will pauses, “But yeah. We’ve been going out for a little while. He’s great.”

“That’s awesome, man,” Mike grins, “I’m happy for you.”

“Wait,” you say, your mind working on overtime –

Will

Rico

Psychic

Kissing

Powers

Nosebleeds??

“Has Rico *infected* you?” you hiss under your breath. Mike gasps and Will grins sheepishly.

“Yeaaaaah we think so. I started getting nosebleeds this summer and we thought it was just ‘cause everyone was... well... bleeding in ridiculous ways, but then I started getting flashes of like, people’s thoughts and shit, so he definitely transferred some of his telepathy abilities to me and everything,” Will explains.

“Oh my god,” you groan.

“That’s awesome, welcome to the second-hand psychic club,” Mike cheers quietly, high fiving Will as you hold your head in your hands and continue to shake it.

“That was *dangerous*, you could have *died* –“

“Yes, but worth it?” Will offers, “How many other gay guys do you

know who aren't dating anyone else."

"I mean... I guess, but..." you sputter.

"Let Will have his happiness, Jane," Mike laughs.

"I swear, you all would just... willingly torture yourselves for love if left unchecked," you mutter.

"Wouldn't you?" Mike says, smiling fondly at you. You stick your tongue out at him instead.

"I don't know, being a psychic sucks, *as you are both fully aware* –"

"Eh, I already got fucked up by our good ol' pal the Mind Flayer, I don't think this really has changed very much," Will points out.

You just glare at him in response.

"At any rate, let's just... keep this quiet for now," Will says seriously, "For Rico's sake."

"Definitely," Mike says.

"I promise," you agree.

"Thanks, guys," Will smiles weakly, "We'll deal with what comes next if we all get out of this mess."

"Yeah," Mike sighs, his word hanging over the three of you for far too long.

"Hey, Jane."

You all look up to see Tarek, Fumiko, Eric, Craig, and Terry standing there, with varying expressions on each of their faces. You groan softly, not really...

Up for...

More apologies...

From people who should have had your back...

From the beginning.

“Um... do you want to talk?” Fumiko finally says.

“Not really,” you admit.

“Jane –“ Mike groans.

“I’m not trying to be rude,” you continue, grimacing slightly, “I’m just... I already talked with Kali and it was... a lot, you know? And all of this is a lot. All of this is too much and I’m just... tired. I guess.”

“We get that,” Fumiko reassures.

“I just... I don’t know about the rest of these guys,” Terry mutters, “But I feel guilty, that’s all.”

You snort a little.

“I should hope.”

Mike groans again.

“I’m sorry, but that’s how I feel!” you say, beathing in deeply, “I came around – to all of you – and I *told* you –“

“You did,” Eric agrees, “And we were dicks.”

You frown at him.

“You’re serious?”

“Dead serious,” Eric pauses, “I... I don’t know about the rest of these guys, but, I feel like you understand – anyway – look, I hadn’t thought about... the lab... and everything that happened for *years*. And then you show up, and not only are you *there*, but you also tell me I can’t, like, continue to live in peace – I don’t know, I lashed out, which wasn’t fair to you, and I’m sorry.”

“Well...” you frown, “Thanks?”

“Same here,” Terry says.

“Yeah, that’s... what happened to me, too,” Craig agrees.

“I just... I didn’t believe you. And that wasn’t fair of me,” Tarek runs a hand through his hair, “I tend to get... well, I tend to get fairly self-important. Let’s just all blame the fact that I was the first psychic to survive, I guess.”

“No, you don’t get to blame this on something that simple,” you say before you can stop yourself, “You should have believed me.”

“You’re right,” Tarek agrees, “I should have.”

“And I should have realized the situation was too dire for me to stay where I was,” Fumiko murmurs, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.”

“Well... thanks, guys,” you sigh, “I’m... sorry I’m not in a fantastic place for apology acceptance right now –“

“You don’t have to be,” Fumiko says quickly, “We just wanted to get this off our chests before... things went back to chaos.”

“Thanks for that,” you say, “Um... but now that everyone’s waking up we... should probably plan for the chaos... rather than talk about our feelings and everything...”

“You mean you *don’t* want us to all dredge up our trauma and cry together as a family?” Fumiko jokes, smiling a little.

“I sincerely would rather not,” you say, grimacing.

“What are you all doing to our little sister?”

Wiconi stands in the doorway, Renee resting on her arm with her eyes closed. Mpilo is resting his chin on top of Wiconi’s head, smiling from ear to ear.

“We’re apologizing,” Craig mutters.

“Oh, good, do we get one too?” Wiconi asks.

“Oh geez,” Tarek mutters.

"I'm just saying, a *bunch* of you guys didn't believe *me* either –"

"We don't have *time* for this!"

"And how is that fair to *me*?"

"We're sorry to you, too," Fumiko interjects, "Really, Wiconi. We are."

"*Thank* you," Wiconi says, "Finally, some *respect* in this family."

Renee snorts while Mpilo chuckles.

"I think the Department of Energy made too many psychics," Mike mutters in your ear.

"I heard that," Renee protests.

"I stand by it," Mike says, "Too many of you guys."

"Your girlfriend is fairly low on the list, you know," Wiconi snorts, "If you want fewer of us, you'd probably lose her."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Yuh-huh!"

"This is *riveting*," Renee says, rolling her eyes, "But we should get to the matters at hand."

"Always a barrel of laughs you are, little sister," Mpilo snorts.

"That's what we have *you* for."

"Come now! We all need to cheer each other up and keep each other going!"

"Or, we could *acknowledge* that there are a bunch of mosters outside, roaming the snow, looking for us, and trying for our blood!"

"What' they're *doing*," you mutter angrily, "Is trying to get to *me* and to *Mike* so we can't close the portal. But that's not even what we think we should do."

Wiconi frowns, “It’s not? But that’s what you guys did last time –“

“Yes, and they’re back now, so it clearly didn’t work,” Mike mutters.

“I mean, if we manage to keep you guys happy –“

“You can’t keep us happy forever,” you say softly.

Everyone watches you, as you pull yourself together,

Everything that had been building up within you –

Coming out –

Coming together –

At last –

“If these past four years have taught me *anything*,” you continue, aware of everyone watching you – even more people, as the loud talking of your group wakes more up – aware of Mike gripping your arm tightly, aware of your heart pounding loudly in your chest.

“If they’ve taught me anything... It’s that... you can’t ever erase trauma,” you pause, “You can’t ever make it go away completely. You can heal, you can move past it – but you’re always going to have a scar.”

You look down reflexively, as everyone congregates around you in the kitchen.

“What happened to me – what happened to Mike – what happened to *Will* – what happened to us all... it won’t ever go away. We can heal – we *are* healing – and we can move to places where we function, more or less. But we’re scarred. We’ll always *be* scarred. And unfortunately, sometimes things can happen to reopen those wounds. Maybe we’ll patch ‘em up quick, maybe not. But we shouldn’t be vulnerable to that,” you say.

You take another deep breath.

“We don’t have another choice. The Mind Flayer is out for blood –

our blood – our *planet's* blood. And we have to kill him. That's the only way we'll finally be safe. The only way... the whole universe can be safe, right? So... we have to stop hoping we can keep me and Mike and anyone else perfectly healthy. We can be healthy sometimes – we've come that far. But we – no one – no one can ever be mentally perfect *all the time*. And we should give ourselves the space to heal the way we have to," you finish, looking back up at Dad, who is looking at you with a mixture of pride and desperation.

"We have to all come together – all of us – and we have to go into the Upside Down. And we have to kill it," you say.

"We won't all live through it," Renee says softly.

"I don't know about the rest of you guys," Mpilo says, his voice serious – such a rare occurrence, every time it throws you into shock – "But... I would *happily* lay my life on the line to protect this world we call home."

"Me too," you whisper.

"Me too," Mike says.

"Me too –"

"Me too."

"Yeah, me too."

Everyone keeps reiterating, even Terry and Craig and Eric, and you look at Hopper as everyone turns to him, the only person to not have repeated the words.

He looks around at everyone, and finally his eyes rest on your again.

"Yeah," he smiles a little, "Me too."

You smile back at him, wide.

"So, we need to figure out a plan," Fumiko says.

"This won't be easy," Renee agrees.

“The Monster knows about me and Jane, but he doesn’t *really* know about the rest of you guys,” Mike says, “What he knows is limited. So we have some elements of surprise on our hands.”

“Which we should exploit,” Wiconi interjects.

“Exactly.”

“We need to plan this carefully,” Hopper continues, walking up to you and Mike and folding his arms across his chest, “As carefully as we can. We can’t afford to make any mistakes.”

“A single one could cost us a life and a valuable player,” Mpilo murmurs.

“What about those of us who don’t have powers good for fighting?” Maria asks softly.

“There’s something useful in all of our gifts,” Kali says, walking up to Maria and smiling down at her, “We awll have something to offer. But you’re right, a lot of us shouldn’t be in the action.”

“Namely, Maria shouldn’t, and Rico shouldn’t,” Joyce says.

“I don’t want to sound like a coward, but I’m not sure what I’d be good for, either,” Terry sighs, “I’m sorry.”

“Well, telephotography isn’t a great battle tactic, you’re right,” Renee snorts, “But we’ll figure something out. You do also have photographic memory – *I* don’t even have that.”

“Yes, Renee, it’s almost like you *don’t* have a *perfect* mind or anything like that,” Terry says, sticking out his tongue.

“Guys, let’s keep on focus. Renee, Terry, work together – maybe you guys can come up with a halfway decent plan if you’re not constantly bickering,” Hopper orders.

Renee rolls her eyes, “Yes, sir!”

“I will not take orders from a pig,” Terry mutters under his breath.

“Oh geez,” Renee groans.

“Fine, then just do what you want! And we’ll all die, and it’ll be great,” Hopper shouts.

“Please, calm down, Jim,” Joyce whispers, “This isn’t helping anyone right now.”

“But –“

“We don’t have a lot of time here!” Mike shouts behind you.

Everyone turns to look at him, including you, frowning at the look on his face. His eyes are barely open, and his face is pulled taught in concentration, brow furrowed, mouth in a thin line.

“They’re coming,” Mike finally whispers.

“They’re – what?” Wiconi asks.

“The monsters. The Mind Flayer... is strengthening his monsters... and they’re going to be here. Soon.”

“How soon?” Nancy chokes out.

“About a day. Not much longer than that.”

“Well that’s just fucking *great*,” Steve shouts, “Just fucking *peachy*, real swell, this information you’ve given us–“

“We have no time to bicker and dither about this,” Renee snaps, “We have to start forming a plan. *Now*.”

“Alright, Renee, let’s go. Anyone else think they can use some sort of genius power – psychic or otherwise – to help us figure out a plan?” Terry sighs.

“I’ll help,” Mike says, “I can look into the future if nothing else, I guess.”

“Great,” Terry agrees.

“I’ll try to help. I’m not a psychic or a genius but more heads are

better than not,” Lucas pipes up.

“And – I mean – I’ll do what I can, if you’re okay with it,” Doc Owens offers.

Terry sighs, “Yeah, fine.”

“You’re okay with a guy from the lab that tortured you but not a cop?” Hopper mutters under his breath.

“Now, now,” Joyce whispers back. Terry rolls his eyes, but doesn’t say anything in response.

“I can help,” Maria murmurs quietly.

“Are you sure?” Renee asks.

“Yeah,” Maria nods, frowning, “I’m sure.”

“Let’s get to work,” Terry states, “The rest of you... sit tight. Prep yourselves. I don’t know how people prepare for fighting.”

Wiconi rolls her eyes, “Right. Rest of us psychics please start eating as much food as we can... we need to be energized up.”

“Don’t eat too much,” Max retorts, “We can’t have you all in food comas.”

“But that’s the best kind of coma!”

“Wiconi –“ Fumiko groans.

“Just let me enjoy the last few moments of my short life –“

“Alright, that’s not allowed,” Steve says.

Everyone turns to look at him, frowning or glaring or smirking.

“What’s not allowed?” Wiconi snorts.

“Defeatist talk. I’m not saying we should become optimists about this situation, or anything. But if we start saying crap like we’re all going to die – then that’s exactly what’ll happen, you hear me?” Steve

shouts, “We have to try to survive, we *have* to. Because that’s how we win.”

Everyone’s silent for a long minute.

“Alright,” Wiconi says, “Yeah. This won’t be my last meal.”

“Fuck no it won’t,” Steve agrees. Wiconi smirks again.

“It’s a shame you’re not a lesbian, weirdo.”

“I’m good, but thanks for thinking of me.”

“Anytime.”

You manage to actually giggle at this, making Will grin over at you. You walk over to the pantry and pull out food, as everyone else begins to break up into varying small groups. You watch Mike go with a small smile, as he looks over his shoulder and watches you until you’re out of sight.

“Hey, kiddo?”

You look up to see your Dad standing next to you, smiling slightly, though it’s strained against his face.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Do you want to talk?”

“Sure...”

He leads you into another room as you scarf down more cereal and leftover bread, not truly a fan of the taste on your tongue but glad to be having any food at all. He wraps an arm around your shoulders, squeezing them slightly as you reach another empty room.

“Jane...” Dad begins, his voice choking up, tears leaning into his eyes which he quickly wipes away.

“What’s wrong?” you ask softly.

“I think you know...”

“Yeah,” you sigh, “I know.”

“I’m so, so proud of you, chicken,” Dad continues, “You’ve... you’ve grown up real well, you know that, right?”

You smile a little, “I think so.”

“And... I hate that... I hate that we’re caught in this situation,” Dad takes a deep, shaking breath, looking anywhere but at your face.

“Because... you don’t deserve... to keep suffering like this.”

“Dad –“

“But... I know you can do this.”

Your smile grows slightly wider.

“You do?”

“Yeah,” Dad grins back, “I do. And I’ll help you however I can. I promise.”

You throw your arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you, Dad,” you whisper.

“Thank you, Jane,” he murmurs back.

“For – for what?”

“For being you,” Dad says, smiling a little, “Just... for being you. And being in my life. It has made mine so much brighter.”

You grin at him and hug him again, for a long time, before pulling back and taking a deep breath.

“So...”

“Once more, onto the breach,” Dad says, “You’ve done so much already. You can do this too.”

You nod, steadying yourself, and walk back into the kitchen and

living room, where everyone is sitting around each other, not talking much louder than a whisper, eating everything left in the house. Scars and bloodstains and bruises litter all of your bodies.

You walk over to Chester and Eddie, playing with them through the bars of the cage, Holly smiling at you in reassurance.

One more time.

One last battle.

Then you'll be free of... *this*.

You go back to eating your cereal, closing your eyes and wishing –

Hoping –

Praying?

That you'll get through this one too.

“Alright guys.”

Everyone look up as Renee and the others reenter the room, Renee frowning slightly, and Mike looking over at you with a small smile.

“We have... a plan. We think.”

“Please tell me this plan doesn't involve a suicide mission,” Steve groans.

“In theory, no,” Terry reassures.

“But in practice?”

“We'll see, I guess.”

“This is fun,” Jonathan mutters.

“Regardless, the plan is as follows – we have most of us fight, and distract the monsters long enough on the surface – we try to decrease their numbers as much as we can,” Lucas interjects, “And then a select number of us goes... into the Upside Down.”

“And does... what?” you ask.

“From what I’ve learned about that monster – and I admit, fully, that it isn’t much,” Doc Owens says, “I don’t know what will defeat him much more beyond extreme amounts of heat and fire. Now, if we had your brother Eduardo here –“

“He’s twelve, he will *not* be here,” Wiconi mutters.

“That would be easy. But we’re going to have to use... well... I think we can maybe trick his mind and... I think if we use a combination of Eric’s energy shield, the space and time powers, and alterations of the Mind Flayer’s reality with Kali, we might be able to generate so much energy as to defeat him in a more... roundabout, way. And regardless, we have ways of making fire that we’ll be bringing with us, too,” Doc Owens finishes.

“So... it’ll be who down in the Upside Down?” Max demands.

“Eric, Jane, Mike, and Kali, plus some others to help protect them. Whoever wants to go,” Renee says, “Probably good fighters. And people comfortable with arson.”

“So it’s down to me again,” you whisper.

“I’m sorry,” Mike says, his voice choking on his way out, “I wish it didn’t have to be, but –“

“No, it’s okay,” you respond, holding up your hand, “I... figured.”

“Do you think you can do it?” Renee asks seriously.

You meet her eyes, steadying yourself.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Then we don’t have time to waste,” Terry says, “Rest up. Eat up. Drink water. Do whatever you can to get your strength back up.”

“And then?” Dustin asks quietly.

“Then, in the morning, we finish this. Once and for all.”

You walk back to another room and sit alone on a bed, staring out in front of you.

You'd only been in the Upside Down in your mind – never in actuality.

And you were absolutely terrified that you wouldn't walk back out again.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hiiiiiiii guuuuuyyyyysssss

So I've had a rough few months because 2018 is apparently the year that keeps on kicking me in the ass, but we're on the home stretch now and I really want to finish this story, so I'm going to try to keep working hard until I finish this thing. We have two more real chapters left and then the epilogue.

Get ready though, because those last two chapters? Real nailbiters. Heart attacks may occur.

Brace yourselves.

And, as always, comment!!!! I require your feedback even if it's just wordless emotions, thank!

43. Whatever it Takes

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for blood, gore, suspense, and minor character death (total of four: one white man, one white woman, one man of color, one woman of color)

NOVEMBER 3 1987

MIKE LEVINSON

“Alright. Our main goal – do *not* forget – is keeping the invasion group alive,” Renee states.

You stand amongst the Invasion Group – you, Jane, Eric, Kali, Hopper, Doctor Owens, Will, Wiconi, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Joyce, and Mpilo – just waiting, watching as everyone else piles together and begins plotting, discussing, trying to figure out –

How they would get you all in there.

You take a deep breath, digging your fingers into the counter.

You didn’t know what was coming.

You didn’t know what would happen next.

You only knew...

You had to protect Jane.

Above all else, you had to protect Jane.

And kill that fucking asshole.

“So the rest of us – we have to work at one-hundred and ten percent. There’s going to be a lot of pushback. This is the final countdown for everyone. Maria, Holly, Erica, and Karen – you’ll all be staying in the cabin,” Renee continues, “You need to watch the birds and you are

too young to fight at any rate.”

Holly, Erica and Maria nod, Karen wrapping her arms around the three of them.

“But everyone else – we all have to be out in the field,” Renee finishes, “So if I didn’t mention you earlier, you’re in the group that stays on the surface.”

“Fine by me,” Terry sighs.

“It’s not going to be easy on the surface, my brother,” Mpilo says, clapping Terry on the shoulder, “There are going to be *many* creatures to battle –“

“We’re running low on ammo,” Max points out.

“We have more in the police station,” Hopper says, “A big thing we’ll go for first is getting there and getting the ammo out.”

“Should we send everyone there? Seems like a good way to make us vulnerable,” Lucas asks.

“No, we should send people who can defend themselves without ammo,” Hopper says, grimacing, “Which, unfortunately, is a good chunk of the Upside Down group.”

“Invasion Group,” Renee mutters.

Hopper groans while Dustin turns to Renee and says, “I feel your pain. He *never* respects proper nomenclature.”

“Is this *really* the time?” you ask, “Really? Is this the time?”

“I agree, Mike,” Hopper grumbles.

“*Anyway*, so unfortunately those who should go to get more ammo include... Mike, and Jane, and Wiconi, and Eric,” Renee sighs, “Are you four up for that?”

“Yeah,” Wiconi mutters, “I am, anyway.”

“Shouldn’t we also hit up the ammo store?” Nancy asks, “They’ll probably have even more than the police station.”

“Right, but it’s on the way back – so, in theory, they should go to the police station, grab everything there, and then grab whatever else they can from the ammo store,” Renee responds.

“Then more should come with them, right? There’s only so much we can all carry,” Nancy retorts, frowning.

“*Since* the ammo store is closer,” Hopper interjects, “Maybe some of us should go there, carrying whatever we have left, and grab on our own.”

“I like that plan,” Steve pipes up.

“Alright, we’ll send Nancy, Jonathan, Steve, Renee, and... Mpilo to the ammo store,” Terry orders, “And then all meet up back here. Just leave some ammo for the rest of us to *protect ourselves*.”

“Can do,” Nancy sighs, “We still have a bunch from our journey, don’t we, Jonathan?”

“Should, yeah,” Jonathan agrees.

“Should the four of us go out then?” Eric grunts.

“This’ll be fun,” Jane sighs.

“Yes, you should try to come back as quickly as possible,” Hopper urges, “We don’t have time to waste.”

You all nod, look at each other, and step out into the snow.

It’s quiet at first – just snow and wind, rushing against your neck and face. Whatever piles of corpses – human and monster, old and new – that had been there before was covered, now, with a thick layer of snow. The snow is thick everywhere, and yet, still only comes up just to your chest. At the very least, it’s not over your head. It is, however, over Jane’s head.

You lift up Jane with Wiconi, and she climbs onto your shoulders,

helping increase your momentum as you all trudge through the snow.

“You know what would have helped?” Eric grunts, shoving his beanie further over his ears.

“What?” Wiconi sighs.

“Fucking. Snowshoes.”

“As far as I know, we only have the one pair,” you answer.

“Great. Just great. Are we going to *get* through this ridiculous amount of snow?” Eric sighs.

“Consider, Eric – you can create energy fields and force fields and shields and shit,” Wiconi points out, “Couldn’t you move the snow with that?”

“Fuck Wiconi,” Eric groans, “No, I couldn’t – not without draining all my energy.”

“Between us all, *this* is draining all *my* energy,” you grunt out.

“That’s just fucking fantastic,” Eric mutters.

Jane sighs audibly in your ear, and you feel her move her hand up, raising her arm aloft.

“Wait, Jane, don’t –“

“RaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Jane screams, and the snow explodes in front of you, going every which way, carving out a deep path in front of you through the snow across the town.

The snow settles slowly on each of you, falling lightly amongst the whipping harshness of the ongoing blizzard.

“Okay,” Wiconi grunts, sputtering snow out of her mouth and off of her lips. She continues sputtering for a few more moments, grunting and grumbling as she does so.

“Okay,” Wiconi repeats, “As *badass* as that was, Jane, please do *not*

do that again.”

“But –“

“How much energy do you have left at this point?” Wiconi snaps.

Jane sighs, “Not much.”

“Rest up. Let’s go.”

Jane nods, resting against you, as you all continue to push through, the snow beginning to fill in the chasm as you walk across it quickly.

“What are the odds nothing heard that?” you mutter.

“Hopefully high...” Wiconi whispers, her mouth twisted into a deep frown.

“I admire the optimism, but I don’t think we’re going to be so lucky,” Eric snaps, “Can’t you hear it?”

You all fall silent as one, the soft pattering of the snowflakes crashing into the ground filling your ears, along with –

Footsteps.

So many footsteps.

Running.

“Okay,” Wiconi whispers, “Um...”

“On the count of three, we run,” you urge.

“Why on three?” Eric snaps.

“Eric!” Wiconi hisses, “So we don’t crash into each other!”

“Fucking – one!” you grunt.

“Okay, *fine* –“

“Two –“

“Hurry!” Jane whispers urgently in your ear.

“THREE!”

You all take off, sprinting across the snow trench, slipping and sliding against icy rock as you rarely look down, just run –

Run –

Run –

You can feel your blood pumping in your ears and you slip more than the others because of Jane’s extra weight, but you can’t let her run on her own, she’s still weak from clearing the snow –

Go go go go –

You start to hear the growling, now,

And your heart stops

Just for a second.

You can taste your own fear on your lips.

“GO!” Jane screams, and Eric and Wiconi run faster, sliding against the ice to move down the path. You try to do that, but you’re too afraid of hurting Jane, so you just keep carefully running instead.

A dark shape comes in your peripheral vision.

You turn, mouth opening in fear, as you watch a Demogorgon run up to you, flower mouth open wide, teeth shining with liquid sheen, black inky skin dancing against white fluffy snow.

A scream begins to escape your lips –

And a large, glassy-like cover to your vision appears, surrounding you and Wiconi and Eric, and you turn to see Eric holding up his hands, his chin straining as he keeps the shield aloft. The Demogorgon crashes into it, thrown backward deep into the snow, before popping back up again and charging once more.

“How long can you hold that?” Wiconi shouts.

“I don’t know!” Eric snaps, “I usually don’t make them this big!”

“Can we run inside of it?” you ask.

“I don’t know!” Eric repeats, “Fuck, you guys realize I haven’t really done the battle thing before, right?”

“Not even getting here?” Jane shrieks.

“Only a little, and not like this! Fuck!”

“Well we can’t stand here, so we need a new idea!” Wiconi yells.

“Does anyone have any? I see more of this guy’s friends off in the distance!” you respond.

You all watch in horror as a black cloud ascends through the white gloom.

“Fuck,” Wiconi whispers, “Fuck, fuck, *fuck* –“

“No!” Jane screams, “It’s not going to end like this!”

“Jane, I swear to god, if you do another big burst of energy, we’re all even more fucked –“

“What if I do it?” you snap back.

“Mike, don’t be ridiculous –“

“I have a lot of tricks up my sleeves and I should be able to use them, too –“

“But –“

“Oh for fuck’s sake! I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up, Wiconi only has so much healing energy, let him do whatever he’s going to fucking do!” Eric roars.

“FINE!”

Wiconi looks at you in terror as you hold up your hand. Jane slides off your back, holding you tightly still. You scrunch up your face, concentrate, and –

You send them –

You send all of them –

Into the past –

Just a little bit. Just to when you were all fighting, a little less than two days ago.

You collapse to the ground, blood coming out of your nose and mouth, and you spit it up onto the ground as it bounces against the cold ice and snow. Jane grabs you and lifts you up, and Eric lets the force field fall, all of them helping you walk forward as you creep through the snow.

“That won’t be the last of them,” Wiconi whispers.

“No, which is why we have to *hurry*,” you grunt.

“Can you even do anything right now?” Eric demands.

“I’m going to fucking have to, won’t I?” you grumble. Jane squeezes your arm, and you manage to walk rapidly through the main town, the buildings having at least given some areas of reprieve from the truly extreme amounts of snow.

Wiconi stumbles up to the door of the Police Station, grabbing the key out of her pocket with shaking hands. You can hear the footsteps again, and you look around wildly, unable to see any signs of monsters approaching, your vision blocked by building after building.

“Hurry,” you hiss, and Wiconi grunts at you, unable to keep her hands steady enough to unlock the building.

“It’s – too fucking – cold –“

Staring into her face, her eyes tell you she’s terrified, too.

“Fuck, let me,” Eric snaps. He grabs the key from Wiconi and tries to turn it in the lock, but finds himself unable to get it to move any more than Wiconi, and now your heart is pounding way too hard.

“How stupid would it be to just break the window?” Jane asks, her voice shaking.

“Uh –“

You see a demo-dog creep down a street in the distance.

Your eyes widen.

Jane punches her arm through the glass –

CRASH!

The sound echoes off the snow and the buildings –

And the demo-dog turns to look at you all.

“Go, go, go –“

Jane reaches in and unlocks the door from the inside, looking in horror as you all urge her to go faster, as more and more demo-dogs start to line up behind the first, and start sprinting across the snow right towards you –

Finally Jane kicks the door open –

You all stumble into the building, but now there is nothing there to block you all –

“Hide!” Wiconi cries, and you all duck into room after room, you thanking everything in the universe that there was a little entryway before the actual police station proper. You duck behind a counter, and roll across the floor towards a desk, crouching in the chair region between the cabinets.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

The only sound you can hear is your heart pounding in your chest –

Lub-dub

Lub-dub

Lub-dub

Lub-dub

Lub-dub

Lub-dub

Lub-dub

You hear snarling in the distance and feel your heart beat faster –

Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub
Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub
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Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub Lub-dub

The snarling is much too close now –

You have to think –

Fuck, where do you go –

You hear scratching on your left side

You roll over

Lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub –

You get onto the right side of the desk

And you hear a monster creep to where you just had been

Shit shit shit shit shit

Lubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdu

You scramble through the desks, reaching one across the room, hiding against the cabinet and holding your hand over your mouth to mask the sound of your breathing –

Too close, too close, too close, too close –

You crawl on your hands and knees, reaching the next desk, backing up against the inside, biting your lip so hard that blood starts to leak against your teeth –

Lubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdublubdub –

You hear them coming

They are snarling as they prowl

The sounds of their feet, their claws against the linoleum

Clack

Clack

Clack

Clack

So you roll again, reaching another desk

Just have to get to Hopper's office

Just have to get inside

Without them seeing you

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

You can feel your sweat pooling against your clothes, and your heart is beating much too erratically, and it's so loud you're worried they can *hear* it, or smell your blood under your skin and on your lips, and you grip against the slippery floor, trying to find something to hold onto –

Not a breath dares to leave your lips –

For fear that you make another sound –

One sound too many –

So close, so close, so close, so close –

You can hear the sound of feet skittering across the floor towards you, and you reach for your knees to roll away from the desk towards the next, and in the process –

You just slightly –

Tap –

The –

Rolling –

Chair –

SQUEEEEEAAAAAAAAAK –

LUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUB –

You hear the monster hiss, from somewhere in the room –

The footsteps move rapidly towards you –

GET UP

GET UP

GET UP

GET UP

GO GO GO GO GO GO GO –

You stand up and run –

Run –

Run –

To Hopper's office –

You see the monster chasing after you –

You don't have time –

You stop, grab a chair –

SMACK –

The monster goes flying into the window, out into the snow, black blood spilling across the room. More monsters start to climb over the counter, rushing into the main room. You shriek and jump into Hopper's office, closing the door rapidly behind you and locking it.

Your ears are ringing and you can barely think as the monsters start rushing at the door, trying to knock it down. Frantic, you shove the furniture in front of the door, digging around in everything for some sort of weapon. Spotting a closet, you open it and wrench out guns, hoisting them over your shoulder and checking for ammo as the monsters start to claw through the wood.

Spotting the window, your heart still pounding –

LUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUBLUBDUB

–

You wrench it open –

CREEEEEEEEK!

FUCK!

You jump out into the snow, landing into a giant drift and sinking into it. The cold shocks your system, so overwhelmed with panic and sweat and bodily-generated heat.

A monster roars right in your ear.

You scream and, on instinct, rip the monster in half – one half in the past, one half in the future – before you even see what kind of monster it was. All that's left is black blood, scattered all over the snow.

Checking first for more, you stumble to your feet and load your gun, pointing it into Hopper's office where monsters are beginning to claw into the room. You shoot it, the kickback startling you a little, but each monster goes down and they begin to clog up the room.

The hairs on the back of your neck stand on end.

Your heart, finally starting to calm down, picks back up the pace.

You whirl around and shoot monsters approaching you from behind, their bodies flying back into the snow with the force of the bullets. Black blood leaks everywhere into the snow, creating weird dark tunnels down to the ground, and you hold back your vomit and turn back to Hopper's office. The monsters appear to be trying to rip their way through the other dead bodies, and you run away from the area, back around the police station, towards the front of the building.

It's quieted here some, only a few demo-dogs which you take out immediately.

You have to find Jane

And Wiconi

And Eric

But mostly Jane

And you have to help them

You have to find them

The sight of blood on the fragments of glass left from the window forces your heart into your throat –

Jane

Jane was bleeding

You jump into the office, walking over the bodies of dead demons, looking around at all the doorways. One lead back to the main office area. Another to the secretary's room. A fourth to where, presumably, more guns and ammunition were kept. And finally, the last one lead to where people were held.

Everything is far too quiet.

You don't like it.

You can't tell where anyone might be – monster or friend.

So you dive into the ammunition room, gun ready.

There are already a bunch of corpses on the floor – and in the corner, Jane is passed out, with Wiconi working over her, looking up at you in terror.

“F – Mike!”

Wiconi starts crying with relief.

“What happened?” you ask, rushing over and holding Jane up off the cold floor.

“Too many followed us in before we could shut the door – Jane killed them all but I've been trying to heal her since without completely weakening myself –“

“Alright – how much ammunition do we have here?” you ask quietly,

wrapping your arms tightly around Jane.

“Tons – I’m honestly not sure how we’re going to get it all back,” Wiconi admits, “Have... have you seen Eric?”

“Not yet,” you sigh, “This is the only place I’ve been since I got out.”

“Where – where did you hide?”

“The main office area. Played hide and seek with the monsters behind desks. Barricaded myself in Hopper’s office and then shot my way out when I found his guns,” you explain tiredly.

“Fuck, Mike.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Do you think there are many left out there?”

“Probably...”

“Then... we’ll look for him after we get Jane back up,” Wiconi says.

You nod, watching in fear as she continues to heal Jane, until finally color begins to leak back into her cheeks and her eyes flutter open.

“M... Mike?” she whispers.

“Hey Jane,” you say, smiling through tears, “Welcome back.”

“What –“

“We’ll explain later, lil’ sis, but we have to move,” Wiconi whispers.

“Right...” Jane nods, sitting up and holding her head in her hands as she sways a little in her spot. Wiconi hoists her up, putting Jane on her back, and together you grab as many guns and bullets as you can, dragging them back into the main room.

Two monsters look up at your entrance, and you quickly shoot them both away, before opening the door to the secretary’s office. Nothing is in there, and you close it back again, frowning.

“I guess he went to the holding area...” you mutter.

“So, we should go there, right?” Wiconi asks.

“I’m... nervous, about what the monsters might be doing...”

“So you’ll need help,” Jane insists.

“Jane...”

“I’m getting better, okay?” she whispers, “Just... let’s go.”

She slides off of Wiconi’s back and grabs a gun from her, loading it and holding it in her hands. Wiconi sighs and nods, setting down the ammunition in the front before grabbing a gun of her own.

You take a deep breath, bracing yourself –

And kick down the door.

Dozens of demo-dog faces look up at you all, and begin to hiss and screech and open wide.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The three of you start shooting at the monsters, the sounds of your gunshots ringing in your ears, as you look around wildly for Eric.

You spot him, in a back corner, inside a cell, with his shield up. He looks at you in shock and starts rapidly shaking his head, but you keep walking forward, shooting at the monsters until they fall to the ground again.

“Eric, what the hell is wrong –“ Wiconi snaps.

A low growl sounds behind you.

You turn around to see a demogorogon – a man-sized one – hanging from the ceiling

Looking down at you

Your mouth opens up to scream

The monster drops down on top of you

Your scream leaves your lips

You stare up into the flower mouth

Teeth on teeth on teeth hanging above you

Saliva dripping onto your face

You keep screaming

At the top of your lungs

When a gunshot rings

And the monster is thrown back

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

You stay frozen in place against the floor, watching as the monster is thrown back from you, up against the wall, as bullet after bullet riddles it's body, and then –

Poof –

It disappears in a puff of smoke and ash.

You turn around wildly to see Wiconi holding up her gun and Jane holding up her hand, and Jane rushes forward to you, holding you tightly in her arms.

“Mike, Mike –“

“I’m okay, I’m okay –“

“Yeah, well, give me a second,” Wiconi mutters, “I’m going to make sure of that.”

The skin on your arm cools as she places her hands above it, the stinging of the monster’s saliva ebbing away with her powers.

“There we go.”

You all look up to see Eric standing there, grinning sheepishly.

“I’m so glad you guys are okay,” Eric admits.

“Don’t go soft on us now, man,” Wiconi snorts.

“What do you expect, I nearly died.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” you grunt, “Before more of them come back.”

“Agreed,” Jane sighs.

You kiss her quickly, unable to stop yourself, as you all climb out of the building and take off running down the streets, through the snow. The journey back doesn’t seem to take as long as the journey there, perhaps, fueled by adrenaline and sheer terror, or numbness to the depth of the snow – though you still need to help Jane from time to time.

Wiconi reaches the house first and wrenches the door open, rushing the rest of you inside, before slamming the door closed and locking it.

“Woah – you guys – do *not* look good –“ Dustin stammers.

“Fuck, no we don’t,” you agree.

Jane sits on the floor, sliding down the wall and staring out in front of her.

“But we have more ammo,” Wiconi says grimly, “And that’s what we left for.”

“Okay, how are we going to fight these monsters if you guys could barely get through to the police station?” Lucas demands.

“Did the other group get back?” Eric asks.

“Yeah, really fast. It’s only down a couple of streets,” Joyce sighs.

“Well, the portal isn’t that far either,” you say, coughing a little, “And we have to do it, regardless.”

“And we won’t be trying to get through a building to get there,” Jane continues.

“I suppose...” Max says, frowning.

“So when do we leave?” Lucas asks.

“Give us a second, okay?” Wiconi whispers, “It... yeah.”

“We can, but we shouldn’t wait around long,” Hopper says, walking into the room, “We don’t have a minute to waste.”

“Yeah, we know,” Eric grunts.

“Look, Hopper, if we don’t rest then we’ll waste more minutes later. Potentially a fatal number more,” Wiconi sighs, “Please, just... give us a second.”

Hopper nods, walking out of the room, patting Jane on the shoulder as he goes. You wrap your arms around Jane and hold her, breathing in deeply, trying to compose yourself.

“I don’t know how I’m going to do it,” you mutter.

“Me too,” Jane agrees.

Wiconi sighs heavily, walking over to us and sitting in front of us.

“Look, guys...”

You watch her together as she takes a deep breath.

“I know this is hard. I know. I’m running on empty myself,” Wiconi begins, watching you both, her eyes soft, her mouth twisted into a frown, “And I know you both just want to curl up and go to sleep.”

“We know we have to keep going, Wiconi, we aren’t... twelve,” you say quietly.

“Right. Right. I don’t know where I’m going with this,” Wiconi takes a deep breath, “How’s this – you guys can do this.”

“Can we?” Jane asks.

“Yeah, you can,” Wiconi smiles a little, “You are both two of the strongest people I’ve ever met, and I’ve lived on a reservation. It’s not going to be easy, and we’re all going to be terrified. But we will *get through it*. You will kill that *jackass* and we will come back and sleep for like, a week, okay?”

“But...” you sigh.

“And if something happens to one of us... well... it’s no worse than if we’re stuck here, you know? Eventually here we’re going to die, too... we’ll run out of food, or we’ll freeze to death, or something. But this way we get to control our fates,” Wiconi says firmly, “And I think you both realize how important that is.”

Jane nods against you.

You nod on top of her head.

“We just have to push once more, get out there, and kill those ridiculous things,” Wiconi finishes, “And we’ll all work together to do it.”

“Yeah,” you whisper.

“We will,” Jane agrees.

“Good,” Wiconi sits back against the wall, “I’m... proud of you both.”

You grin a little.

“Proud, you say?”

“Don’t milk it.”

Jane giggles softly, and the sound is music to your ears.

After a few more minutes of peace, in which you primarily slept and ate stale cereal, everyone gathers in the kitchen. Some are bundled up already. Some are geared up already. The rest, scarred and haggard, are just standing there, listening.

“Our priority,” Hopper begins, looking around at everyone, “Is

getting the Invasion Group into the Upside Down, with as much of their... power energy... intact as possible. We have to make sure that happens. Otherwise, there isn't a point to any of this. Got it?"

Everyone nods in silent unison.

"Alright. Gear up. Invasion group, stick close. Psychics in the invasion group, use as *little* of your powers as possible. You need to be on peak energy when we get in there. The rest will surround us," Hopper instructs. Everyone comes together, and you find yourself next to Bubbe and Zayde.

"Hey," you whisper quietly.

"How are you holding up, zeisele?" Bubbe asks softly.

"Shouldn't *I* be asking *you* that?"

"We survived the shoah, Mikha'el," Zayde snorts, "This is nothing."

"Yeah, but you were a lot younger then..."

"We're young now," Zayde retorts.

"We'll be alright, zeisele," Bubbe soothes, "Will you?"

You look ahead, watching as you all march out of the house, down the streets, through the snow.

"Yeah," you whisper, "I think so."

Bubbe wraps her arm around your shoulder and squeezes, as you all keep walking, the snow piling up around your heads again. The snow is thickly piled in front of you, and Jane calmly clears the path, only using small amounts of energy to flick the snow left and right.

The march seems endless.

You try to not think of it as a death march.

Until, finally, your group pulls up short of the portal, hanging above the field on which you stand.

And monsters start to pour out of the gaping hole, like a black waterfall

Inky water

Splashing into the snow

And running towards you all

In a dark mass

So you hoist your gun

Stay close to Jane

And shoot.

The gunshots ring out far too close to your ears, and you wince, but keep shooting as everyone fans out. You stick close to Jane, your sides pressed up together, as you continue to shoot down monster after monster leaping out towards you.

“DUCK!” Jane screams, and you crash to the ground, nearly missing the demon-something leaping up to where you had just been. Jane knocks it away with the butt of her gun, spinning back around on her heels to shoot two more coming from the right. You scramble back up to your feet and shoot another coming from the left, pressing your back to Jane’s. Automatically, without thought, you both start to move your feet, turning about in a circle and shooting in every direction. A monster jumps at you from the side and you knock it over, Jane shooting it in the throat as it opens its mouth wide.

You turn to grin at her and, unable to stop yourself, kiss her deeply in the middle of the snow. She squeaks in surprise and pulls back from you, grinning, before shooting an oncoming monster without even looking.

“You are... way too badass,” you say, laughing with a combination of joy and nervous energy. Jane grins at you, and you turn around to shoot at an oncoming wave of monsters.

“PRESS FORWARD!” Renee shouts in the distance. You and Jane

walk forward, and you grab Jane's hand and hold it tightly in your own –

Just for a second –

“Mike, we have to focus,” Jane sighs.

“I know,” you agree, “I just –“

“GUYS, LOOK OUT”

You both dive to the ground as a Demogorgon runs up to you, and Fumiko shoots it back, falling to the snow beside you and covering you as she continues to shoot at every monster approaching.

“Look alive – seriously –“

“We are!”

“Alright – alright –“

You jump up to your feet and help Jane do so too, and Fumiko grabs Jane's hand, and you all rush forward into the hoard of monsters, Jane dropping her empty gun and grabbing another out of her pocket and continuing to shoot, both of her hands holding it steady as she aims at each creature jumping up towards you. You duck underneath her to shoot at demo-dogs rushing up through the snow, and punch in the jaw to send it flying backwards.

“KEEP MOVING!”

Jane grabs your hand and helps you get up, and you run through the monsters, shooting at them haphazardly, Craig and Wiconi and Kali joining you and shooting ahead, all aware that the longer you're on the surface, the more likely anyone could get hurt –

Flash

Black

Blur

Dive

Scream

Pain –

Blood –

Screams, not yours –

Vision Fading –

Breath in pants –

Can't feel your heart as well –

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!

You open your eyes, your vision flooding back, to see Craig grabbing the monster off of your body, as it turns back on him, and Jane screams louder, tears flowing out of her face, and you feel hot liquid pooling somewhere on your leg, and you see Wiconi dive towards you, and it's all in a blur –

Too much of a blur –

You look up, seeing your leg bloodstained, but the pain gone, and you start to breathe normally again, as Wiconi collapses in the snow next to you, holding her head in her hands, and Jane stands over the corpse of the monster, and of Craig, who twitches and falls still in the snow.

“Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Fuck –“ Jane shrieks.

“Jane, we have to *go!*” Fumiko roars.

“Fuck –“

“Guys, get *up!*”

Wiconi stumbles to her feet and grabs your arm, and you run forward, your leg not in pain, but you aware of the feeling of your hot blood growing cold the longer you're exposed to the blizzard –

Jane keeps crying next to you –

“JANE, GET IT TOGETHER!” Wiconi shrieks.

“I c-can’t –“

You and Fumiko and Wiconi grab her, and drag her away from the thrall, through the snow back towards a tree. She sits against the tree and sobs, holding her face in her hands.

“I c-c-can’t –“

“You *have to!*” Fumiko urges.

“We need you to keep going,” Wiconi agrees.

“We need you down there, Jane, we need you,” you beg.

“But –“

“I know, that was terrifying,” Fumiko whispers, “I can’t... I’m... Craig...”

And she breaks down crying, falling into the snow and holding her head in her hands.

“Not you too!” Wiconi groans.

“He was our *brother!*” Fumiko retorts.

“We knew we’d lose people today! Be glad we didn’t lose Mike!” Wiconi shouts.

“Guys, we can’t stand here bickering, we have to go back in!” you shriek.

Jane keeps crying heavily against your shoulder. You wrap your arms around her, hold her as tightly as you can, and whisper soothingly, as screams and gunshots and monster roars go out everywhere around you.

“We need to calm her down,” Fumiko hisses.

“I usually just let her cry it out,” you admit desperately.

“Fucking –“

“What’s going on?”

You all turn to see Hopper walking up towards you, glaring at you all, blood on his face and scars littered across every inch of visible skin.

“We’re getting creamed out there – Lucas’ dad is down –“

“Wait, *what?*” Wiconi shouts.

“Yes, and we need you guys to keep pushing or else –“

Jane wipes off her eyes, takes in a deep breath, and moves forward.

You follow her hurriedly, but in a straight line. Hopper falls in behind you, and Wiconi behind him, and Fumiko bringing up the rear.

You keep walking in a straight line, Jane shooting every monster that gets close to you, and the rest of you picking them off from the sides.

And you march

And march.

And keep marching forward.

And the rest of the group joins you –

Lucas and his mom both visibly crying –

Continuing forward

March

March

March

March

Your hands are shaking beyond belief

But you know you just

Have to keep

Moving forward

Suddenly, your whole group is right in front of the portal

Hovering around it

And a conglomerate of demogorgons are standing in front of it, hissing and roaring in your direction.

“This is it,” Renee shouts, “*CHARGE!*”

And you all run forward

Together

You screaming as you continue to shoot at every monster you see

And you look around, briefly

At everyone fighting around you

You see Lucas and his mom crying, Lucas covered in blood all over his clothes

You see Dustin, with scar after scar littered on his body, fighting with Max and Kali, both also clearly wounded in various places on their limbs and torsos

You see Eric and Terry fighting back to back, Terry shouting in fury as he knocks away multiple monsters

You see Dustin’s mom, and Bubbe and Zayde, and Joyce all in a square, fighting against monster after monster. Bubbe grabs one by the stubby tail and throws it across the field as Zayde takes a knife from his pocket to stab a second.

You see Renee and Tarek fighting together, Tarek stabbing a monster with a long knife as Renee shoots another down the throat.

Fumiko and Wiconi are fighting together next to you, guns shooting into the waves of monsters, as Jane continues to shoot monster after monster, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Mpilo, with an army of weird zombie-animals and whatever people he could get behind him, directs them to take down monster after monster in a wave of rotting flesh.

Rico and Will are next to each other, Will clearly unwilling to lose sight of Rico.

You take a deep breath and keep shooting, but the monsters never seem to stop –

They just keep coming

And coming

And coming

Out of the giant black hole

Like it's a faucet that can never turn off

And you're running out of bullets

Everyone's running out of bullets

Someone's going to get hurt

You just had to...

You just had to get in there

But you couldn't get closer than two yards from the mouth of the hole

You watch in horror as people start to get tired, and as such, injured
–

Wiconi cries out as a scratch from a monster causes blood to flow from her arm –

Lucas shouts in horror as a monster nearly tackles him, before his mother shoots it off –

Dustin screams in terror as his mother is tackled, shooting the monster away, but it's too late, and you're screaming for Dustin as Kali drags him away –

Jane screams in your ear as Fumiko is tackled by a Demogorgon –

You start screaming with her as you watch the blood trickle across the snow and Fumiko's body lies still, and Jane falls to her knees, tears streaming down her face as Wiconi screams at the top of her lungs next to you –

Everything blurs around you

You feel like you're going to pass out

Darkness creeps into your eyes

It's too much

Too much

Too much

Too much

You know the longer you stay out there

The more

That the monsters

Will keep

Killing

Your friends

Your *family*

The people

You

Care

About

You

Can't

Keep

Watching

This

Happen

You scream

Loudly

And before you can stop

Yourself

Before you can control

The wave

You

Just

Stop

All

Of

It

And

It

Freezes

You look up, your hands outstretched

As every monster stays frozen in place – including the ones flowing out of the mouth.

Jane turns to you as her tears flow out of her eyes, her mouth open in shock.

“Kid *what are you doing?*” Hopper demands, running over to you as everyone follows suit. Dustin is openly sobbing. Wiconi is holding her head in her hands and swaying back and forth.

“I had to,” you whisper, “We’d... have kept losing people... if I hadn’t...”

“But –“

“I can keep going,” you say firmly, “It’s... fine.”

You can feel your energy dripping away.

But you have to keep going.

So you take a deep breath and stand tall.

“We’ve lost too many today already. We have to just... go down in there,” you state.

“But...”

“Look, maybe it wasn’t the best fucking idea, but we’ve lost four people already, and the monsters keep coming,” Renee grunts.

“He’s right that we need to just get in there,” Terry agrees.

“What will the rest of you do?” Kali asks hoarsely.

“Retreat, but stay close by,” Renee answers, frowning, “We have to be available if something goes wrong, but...”

“Protect yourselves,” Joyce says seriously, “*All of you.*”

“Will do, chief,” Steve says, spitting up an alarming quantity of blood onto the ground.

“How much longer can you hold them, zeisele?” Bubbe asks tiredly.

“Not much longer, not without decreasing our chances of success down there,” you groan.

“Alright. Then we should break,” Zayde sighs.

“Do you guys need any more ammo to go down there?” Tarek asks tiredly as the Invasion Group congregates together, everyone looking at each other with identical expressions of fear.

“A bit would be nice,” Lucas admits.

Guns and ammunition are transferred. Protein bars are handed out to psychics, with the majority going to you, as you try to regain the energy you’re rapidly losing.

“Alright,” Hopper sighs, “Let’s get in there.”

You all put on masks over your heads.

You look over at Jane.

She looks at you.

And then she steps into the portal.

Notes for the Chapter:

ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH

COMMENT COMMENT COMMENT COMMENT
COMMENT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

THIS IS IT GENTS, WE'RE AT THE FINALE, AND I
WILL ONCE AGAIN POINT TO THAT HAPPY
ENDING I PROMISE TAG

44. Overture

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for Minor Character Death (1), Major Character Deaths (2), References to trauma, deliberate psychological triggering of trauma, torture, and body horror

NOVEMBER 3 1987

JANE HOPPER

You step into a world that instantly strikes you with how cold it is.

It's not cold like the world you just came from.

It doesn't bite at your skin or whip at your heels.

It drains into through your skin, your muscle, your bones, and trickles down into the marrow.

You kind of want to scream – just a little bit – but you don't because you know that's a terrible, terrible, *terrible* fucking idea.

So, instead, you hold your arms tight around yourself, squeezing yourself together.

Trying to not think

About every terrible

Horrible

Terrifying thing

That had happened

So far

This day

You swallow back the bile rising to your throat, and wait, watching as everyone follows in behind you.

Most everyone walks in calmly.

But Mike isn't there yet.

You frown, watching, as Mike runs into the portal, and his shoulders visibly relax.

And you see, through the almost invisible light coming in from the portal, monsters starting to move about.

"I unfroze time," Mike explains, walking up to you, panting, "Everyone else is far away now."

"Good," Joyce sighs, "They should get back to the cabin."

"That was the plan."

Will walks close to your side, the parts of his face visible under his mask extremely pale.

"Are you going to be okay, sweetheart?" Joyce asks softly, wrapping her arm around his shoulder.

"Yeah," Will mutters, swallowing, "I... yeah."

"We're going to be in and out, as quick as we can, I promise," Wiconi says, "We don't want to be in here longer than we have to be."

"I just wish we didn't have to be in here at all," Will mutters.

"Will, you can go back if you –"

"Back into *that* mess? No thanks..."

"Plus, the party stays together," Dustin mutters.

Dad turns on his heel and glares at Dustin, "If it were up to *me*, **none** of you kids would be in here *at all!*"

"Well, we're here, let's get moving," Lucas grunts, "Come on!"

“The longer we’re in here, the more the Mind Flayer can fight back,” Mike reminds, “So yeah, let’s get in and out as fast as possible.”

“Do we know *how* it’ll fight back?” Kali asks.

“More monsters seems likely,” Dad answers, “But... psychological torture as well.”

“Psychological torture?” Eric shouts, his eyebrows twisted into a glare above his mask, “What the fuck do you mean, psychological torture?”

“The Mind Flayer has gotten into our heads in the past,” you hiss, glaring at Eric, “He’s gotten into our heads and played on our deepest fears and insecurities and traumas. This is *not* going to be a walk in the park and we are going to have to be strong in our heads as well as strong in our bodies. Okay?”

Eric looks at you for a long time.

“Okay.”

You turn back, and you all start walking, your steps going across the squishy, mucky ground. That cold still chills you, inch to inch, cell to cell, and you can barely feel your fingers and toes.

You can barely move your legs.

Frowning, you raise up your leg, and place it back down on the ground – but it only moves a few inches.

You try to move the other leg, and it only moves a slight amount, too.

You struggle against yourself.

It’s like your bones are freezing in place.

Slowly

Creeping

Every

Inch

Freezing

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

You try to open your mouth to speak

But you find you can barely move your lips

Only your eyes remain swiveling

And you look over at Mike

And he looks at you

His face twisted into a silent scream

To match your own

You can't look at anyone else

Because your head is frozen in place

And you don't know what to do

You don't know how to break out.

I see you all have come to visit

The screaming inside your head increases

Tenfold?

Fiftyfold?

You want to run

But you can't move at all

I'm afraid I wasn't expecting you, so I haven't cleaned up at all!

The cold in your bones threatens to make you crumple to the ground.

I'm SO sorry about the mess. It's rather hard to handle, isn't it? No wonder you're all... quiet.

You strain

And nothing happens

But don't worry

Screaming

Screaming

Screaming

I'm sure I can clean up the mess

You feel your body being picked up off the ground

You still can't move

Or scream

Or do anything

And the Mind Flayer throws you across the field

Like a rag doll

No

Like a stiff action figure

Because you can't move your limbs

And you're thrown into the ground

You can't even cry out in pain

You just lie, awkwardly, against the rocks and dirt

Come now, Eleven. Don't you want to greet your host?

You're lifted up again

Body hovering above the people below

Straining and screaming internally with no movement outside

It's so quiet

So quiet

You're screaming inside

But everything is silent

The smoke lifts you up, until

Until

Until

The large, dark, smoky diamond head

Of the monster

Appears in the gloom

Staring at you

With no eyes at all

You try

To move

To do

Anything

You're being very rude, Eleven. No hello for me?

You feel

A spark

Somewhere

Deep in your

Stomach

Grab it

Grab it

Grab it –

You know, you've come into my house,

Grab

Grab

Grab

Stretch

It

Out

Draw

It

Out –

You've brought an army with you!

Just

A little

Further

Just a little

More

How am I supposed to react to this, Eleven?

You've

Got

This –

Did you really think I wouldn't fight back?

Just

A

Little

More –

You're about to learn what REALLY happens when you –

And then you explode

Energy shoots out from you in every which way –

Sending the monster back

Back

Back

A primal scream fills the air

And you fall down

Down

Down

You crash into the dirt
The monster keeps screaming
You stumble to your feet, bracing yourself to run
You look up
And see the creature flailing around
Smoke going about in chaotic circles
Twisting and turning over each other
You whirl on your heel to see
The others breaking free of the bond
Running over to where you stand
Mike grabs onto your arm
And everything's a blur
Your thoughts can't come together
You just want to lie down
You watch as Lucas pulls a grenade –
A Grenade?! –
From his pocket
Where the hell –
Pulls out the pin
Did he get that –
Throws it at the monster
It explodes in the smoke

Sending so much of the monster flying
Every which way
More screaming fills the air
So shrill it hurts your ears
And you cry out, collapsing to the ground
Holding your hands over your ears
“Jane! We have to get started!” Mike urges
For a minute, you think you’re going to pass out
From the shrill
Loud
Screaming
But you steady yourself
Pull yourself to your feet
And roar
With everything you have left
Shooting energy forward
To send the Mind Flayer flying backwards
You will win
You will win
You will win
You will –
A loud low rumble moves through you – moves through everyone

The words – are they words? – the sounds are not any language you recognize

It is so many different sounds all stacked on top of each other

Jumbling up together

Increasing in pitch and loudness

Higher and higher

Until it starts to sound like nails

Dragging across a chalkboard

Screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming

Wobbling through the air

Everyone falls to their knees

Holding their hands over their ears

But the sound is so loud

And it fills every inch of the world around you

That it soars into your skin and bones

With no care for your peace

Dustin collapses to the ground

Will starts writhing back and forth

You weakly reach up from the ground with your hand

Trying to reach the monster

With

With something

Some sort of power

Still in you

You are already so weak

Just

Just from fighting

Against his grip

How can

How can

How can

The screaming – the primal, incessant screaming – doesn't cease. Everyone falls to the ground around you, unable to stand or outright fainting. You see blood pouring from Kali's ears next to you, and Wiconi has a slow but steady dribble of blood coming from her mouth.

The monster is reforming in front of you, the smoke left and dissipated by the brief push back coalescing into it's multi-tentacled form

The pain from the scream – is it just a scream if it feels like a weight is pinning you to the ground? – prevents you from raising up your arm

From doing anything

From getting any amount of energy

Towards

That

Bastard

And then another scream fills the air

You look next to you

And see Kali screaming at the top of her lungs

You can't see anything happening

And the monster's scream... thing... is still happening

But

The monster starts shaking its head rapidly

And swiping its long tendrils at things that don't exist

So wildly around the area

It clouds your vision of everything else

And the monster is distracted

From its screaming

Incessant

And terrifying

And you manage to stumble to your feet

Looking over at Mike

Who reaches out to you

And you reach out to him

Aware of your blood trickling down your neck from your ears

And the metallic taste of it in your mouth

Dribbling across your tongue

You almost manage to touch your fingertips to his

When a large sweeping tentacle of smoke

Comes across you both

And knocking you over

You cry out in pain

As a sharp jab

Ripples from your scalp

Where you hit some sort of rock

On the way down

And you crumple up against the rock, trying to heave yourself up, but you can't because Kali is on the ground herself, no longer using her powers, and the monster is free again, and you're fucked, you're fucked, you're fucked, you're fucked

You're –

I SEE YOU ALL HAVE SOME NEW TRICKS UP YOUR SLEEVES

Suddenly, you're raised up off the ground again

The smoke enveloping you around your middle, lifting you up to the height of the monster's head

It's his head, right?

You look around and see everyone's been grabbed this time

Not just you

All in various stages of struggle

Kali trying to move, wriggling against the smoke

Mike roaring and screaming and moving his arms like he's punching the smoke, but he just moves through air

Will crying, sobbing, heaving

Lucas trying to reach any sort of weapon, but continuously turned about in the air, disorienting him

Max biting down on the smoke, to no avail

Wiconi limp against the smoke, her hair falling in curtains around her face

Doctor Owens looking at the monster, eyes wide with fear

Dad roaring and swearing, kicking his legs forward like he's trying to swim to the monster's head

Joyce reaching out for Will, failing to move an inch

Eric trying to put of a shield, but unable to do so with the smoke around him

Mpilo, clearly deep in thought, his brow furrowed, his eyes squeezed tightly shut

And you, thrashing about, trying to do *anything*, and unable to

SO, HOW MANY OF YOU HAVE POWERS NOW? HOW MANY OF YOU DO I HAVE TO KILL?

You watch, mouth open in a silent scream, as the giant diamond head of smoke creeps towards you, or the smoky tendril drags you towards the head, or both, and your nose is inches from the rumbling, fowl-smelling essence

HOW MANY OF YOU STAND. IN. MY. WAY?

Closing your mouth, you grit your teeth, and shake it back and forth as fast as you can. The monster screams again, and you can't cover your ears to stop the pain, and tears leak from your eyes before you even realize it hurts

YOU ALL THINK YOU ARE GODS

You can't breathe normally

Every breath is coming in too shallow

Heave heave heave heave heave –

YOU ALL THINK YOU CAN FIGHT ME

Heaveheaveheaveheaveheave –

You can't feel your

Head

And the light is

Getting a little

Spinny

What's left of it

And there's darkness

Creeping in

Your

Vision

BUT YOU ARE JUST ANTS

Everything

Goes

Black

You wake up on the ground again

Surprised to wake up

Surprised you're still breathing

You look up and see that everyone has been tied up

Crowded together

On manufactured seats

Surrounding the monster

Upon lifting your head, the Mind Flayer grabs you, dragging you over to the others, where everyone is struggling against invisible bonds

It's time for you mutants

Straining, you try to lift up your hand to reach Mike –

But he's too –

Far –

To –

Reach –

To realize who you really are

Your head snaps up

The monster reaches out towards you

And grabs Doctor Owens next to you

Doctor Owens wraths and shouts

As the monster brings him up high

This is the man who helped to create you

You watch

Eyes wide

Trying to

Reach

Or

Break

Through

The –

You think your powers – your “gifts” – are going to save you

Doctor Owens’ head begins to glow an eerie, purple light

He screams

Such a scream

As it forces tears to your eyes

And the monster

Just

Laughs

But what you fail to realize

Horror fills every inch of you as Doctor Owens' limbs get twisted and bent at odd angles

Doctor Owens' is no longer screaming out loud

The monster continues to chuckle

Is that you are still human

Now Doctor Owens' body is being twisted too

And you reach out

You have to save him

You try to

But

You can't

Move

Enough

And I

Just

Reach

Am a God

Another primal scream

Echoes off of

The trees and roots

Of the

Forest

Next to the field

Of the Upside Down

Your creator? He is just a man

Doctor Owens is now twisted far, far, far too much

And you can't breathe

As you watch –

And like you

SNAP!

He will die

You watch, mouth open in silent horror, as Doctor Owens' body is twisted in half, the life leaves his eyes, and he drops to the ground with a *thud*.

Mike lets out a loud scream that is quickly silenced

Everyone is shaking in their seats

You can't move

You don't know

What

To

Do

So. Let's play a little game, shall we?

Will next to you is sobbing, unable to stop himself, but unable to move to wipe the tears and snot from his face

Your brain has gone

Numb

I need one of you

Make it stop

Make it stop

Make it stop

Make it –

To be my puppet, and lead my army

Please

Please

Please

And give me another world to feed off of, at long last

Help

Help

Help

So, let's see which one of you can survive my little fun

Help

Help

Help

Help

Help –

Starting with my old friend

You watch in horror as the tendril grabs onto Will, who starts to scream at the top of his lungs, thrashing around against invisible restraints, Joyce across the semi-circle reaching out and roaring, Dad shouting and shouting and shouting, and you try to grab Will but you can't move at all –

Well, William? Are you scared?

Will keeps screaming, and screaming, and screaming

And it echoes in your ears

You break into sobs as you watch Will become even more frozen

Frozen like a stick

And he doesn't seem able to breathe

He's hyperventilating

Breath coming in too quick

And not being let out enough

The smoke is surrounding him from each side

You can't reach him

But you have to reach him

Someone has to reach him

Not Will

Not Will

Not Will –

A humming fills your ears and you can't figure out the source

But the buzz grows, and grows, and grows – as a golden, bright, translucent,

Thing,

Expands into your view, and you look to see Eric –

Straining –

His mouth open –

As though roaring –

But no sound comes out –

And the force field – shield – something – grows in between

Will

And the monster

And it surrounds Will

And pulls him away

The touch of the force field seems to hurt the Monster, who shrieks in pain again and backs away

Suddenly, the brief slack in the grip he had on you give you

Just enough

Of a minute

In which you grab ahold of every *last bit of energy* you can

And throw it

At the monster

Who roars again

And shoots back into the gloom

From the invisible wall of energy

You shoot at him

Finally free from any grip at all, you keep shooting him back, back, back, back –

Tossing up the smoke like a salad –

Gone –

Not done, but gone for... for now...

You scramble to your feet and run to Will on the ground, Joyce already there and lifting him up gently, as everyone starts talking frantically all at once over each other

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck –“

“We have to get out of here, we have to go back through the portal and –“

“People without powers definitely have to leave!”

“But if we don’t stay here and finish this –“

“What *good* will this be if we all *die*?”

“WE HAVE TO SAVE OUR HOME!”

“QUIET!” you scream, your hands over your ears, “SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!”

Will looks at you thankfully, sitting up and groaning into his hands.

“He got the drop on us!” Mike agrees, glaring at everyone, “We thought he wouldn’t get us immediately and we weren’t ready to fight back when we first got here –“

“We *were* ready!” Lucas shrieks.

“No, we *weren't*! How the *fuck* were we supposed to know that the cold we were feeling wasn't just... this *place*... but also him?” Mike roars, “We know he can freeze us now, but it wasn't instantaneous – he needs to build up his strength and hold on us and now that hold is gone so he has to start from zero!”

“So what the *fuck* do we do?” Max demands.

“I don't... I don't know –“

“Okay, we know our powers *do* cause damage,” you say, standing up and breathing deeply, stitching yourself back together, “We know that our ammo also wounds him, but not for long. I still think we can burn him up.”

“But what if we can't kill him fully?” Mpilo whispers.

“He experiences pain,” Will croaks out, “He experiences fear and pain and hurt. And his presence can grow and weaken... I think if we just *keep* the onslaught...”

“What else do you have from when he possessed you?” you ask desperately.

“Nothing from *then*,” Will pauses, “But... I... I think I can r-read his mind...”

“*What?*” everyone hisses at once.

“Uh... Rico gave me some of his powers. Because. We. Were. Kissing,” Will explains, tumbling over his words, “Fuck, he asked me not to tell but I have to –“

“Like reading minds? He gave you the ability to –“ Joyce says, in an increasingly high-pitched voice.

“Yes, he did, and I can kind of read some of the Mind Flayer's thoughts, so... that,” Will hisses, “Keep your voice down Mom!”

“Okay, okay –“

“What is his plan?” Dad asks.

“He’s going to torture us to death for fun, because we all have annoyed him too much, and then take over me, Mike, and Jane and use us to help destroy our world,” Will whispers.

Everyone looks at each other in terror.

You can’t help but look over at Doctor Owens’ mangled body.

You try to...

You can’t...

You’re...

It’s...

“Is there any way we can *stop him*?” Joyce shrieks.

“I think so,” Will whispers.

“*How*?” Lucas groans.

“Can he even *die*?” Dad grumbles.

“I believe so,” Will whispers, “He... he mainly flinched, from Jane’s big energy blast. But he also was... deliberately... retreating...”

“Running away? So he was scared,” you realize.

“Exactly. And why would he be scared if he can’t get damaged from this – in a permanent way? Otherwise he’d just keep attacking us indefinitely,” Will pauses, “And... I don’t know. I feel like there have been other signs.”

“He does get destroyed in really adverse environments,” Mike admits.

“Exactly.”

“But how do we do that?” Dad insists.

“We have the upper hand now. We know we can get at him and we know that he feels weakness and we *know* what his tactics are,” Lucas says, “We just need to get back to the original plan, but be *unrelenting*

about it.”

“I don’t know how much more I can do,” you admit.

“Then Wiconi needs to heal you –“

“That’s *not* how my healing works,” Wiconi snaps back, “I can heal wounds – I can’t just drain energy into her!”

“I can do shit too, you know,” Mike points out.

“And we’re here to help, too,” Kali reminds.

“But he knows the things you do are illusions... right?” Mpilo asks hoarsely.

“I honestly don’t know. He eventually broke free, but... I don’t know,” Kali groans.

“Those of us who *aren’t* psychic need to work in an *onslaught*, we just have to,” Max demands, “He will be focused on the people using powers. We have to distract him from that.”

“What if he starts to cold us down again?” Joyce hisses.

“Then we have to work at double time,” Dustin says quietly, “Or... something. But we can’t get trapped like that again. We barely got out.”

“Okay,” Eric sighs, “Let’s go.”

You start walking back towards where the Monster had been thrown, scrunching up your eyes in concentration.

Keep moving.

Keep walking.

Keep walking.

The cold, which is still in every inch of you, starts to freeze you again.

Lucas lights up a flare and waves it around you all, the light and heat instantly transforming the atmosphere.

It warms you back up again, and you all keep walking.

Dustin runs up to you, grabbing onto your arm, and forces granola bars into your hands. You look at him gratefully and eat them as quickly as you can, feeling a little more energized – just enough.

You start to see that eerie smoke billowing out of the corner of your eye, and Max runs up from behind you, lighting up a can of hair spray with a lighter. Roaring at the top of her lungs, she shoots the fire every which way, sending the smoke back.

You all keep marching.

You lead the pack, now, Mike close behind you, the two of you on high alert, ready for *any* change in the atmosphere around you.

And then you stop.

There's a large chasm, overlooking a huge pit – the Quarry.

Mike's face pales more next to you.

Looking around, realizing where you are, you see the remains of Barb's body down, down below.

And the monster is growing, growing, growing, growing –

Eric throws out a shield, and the monster roars in fury.

It doesn't seem to want to use English anymore.

It just wants to –

You're thrown back off of your feet and into the dirt by a tendril – everyone is, as it sweeps across the field.

The Quarry is too close to you all – you know he drew you here on purpose. You grab Mike's hand and drag him away, shouting, "RETREAT! RETREAT!"

Lucas runs up to you as you back up to the edge of the woods, glaring furiously, “What the fuck are you doing?”

“He’s going to throw us into the quarry – we have to draw him away from there!” you hiss.

“But –“

The smoke pulses all around you

Filling up the air

It’s dissipated, now

But it makes the presence of the Mind Flayer surround you

You shiver violently with the cold

Max throws a grenade into the densest part of the smoke, and it explodes –

And the explosion ripples out

Out

Out

Out

Blasting the rest of you off of your feet

And you end up in the middle of the forest, alone, disoriented, dizzy

Everything is spinning

You stumble to your feet, looking around wildly and spinning on your heels, eyes widening in shock as you can’t find any sort of baring.

“Hello? *Hello?*”

Your words echo off of the woods.

“Is – is anyone – here? Hello? *Hello?*”

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

Fuck

You start to run through the woods, trying to find any sign of someone – something – *anything* –

And in front of you is

Is

Is

Is

Papa

“You’re not real,” you hiss, stepping backwards rapidly into the tree behind you.

Papa smiles wide, shining white teeth shining in the dark, cold fog

“Am I?”

He takes a step towards you.

Your heart is in your throat.

You try to reach the tree and scramble up –

But the branch is brittle and crumbles in your hands

So you whirl around on your foot and face Papa again, your heart
now pounding as loudly as it can

Your palms sweating

Tears leaking out of your eyes

“You know, Eleven, even if you defeat the Mind Flayer today... *I’ll*
still be out there.”

You swallow heavily as he gets too

Too

Too

Close

Visions of horrible memories flash into your mind

You try to push them out

You take deep breaths and focus on something else –

Anything else –

You have to find something positive

Just like...

Just like Doctor...

Just like Doctor...

Just like Doctor Owens told you...

But...

You...

Can't...

Find...

Anything...

"You'll never be safe, Eleven."

You whimper as Papa walks right up to you, leering down at you, grinning from ear to ear, much too wide, stretching all across his face

—

"So why not just... team up with the Mind Flayer?"

You pull yourself to your feet and run around the tree, shaking from head to foot.

"He can help you kill him."

You grit your teeth tight.

This was like when he tried to get Mike on his side a year ago.

He's done this before.

This is classic behavior.

Papa isn't... Papa.

He's the Mind Flayer.

The Mind Flayer is playing tricks on you.

He's playing tricks on you.

He's playing tricks on you.

"He'll kill *me!*" you manage to shriek out.

Papa grabs your arm, and now you *know* it isn't him

He's too cold

He's as cold as *ice*

You look down at your arm and scream as it freezes before you, icy cold, water turning to crystal –

Energy shoots out from you, knocking the Not-Papa down to the ground. He turns to dust.

You watch in horror for another second –

And another –

And another –

Before you turn and sprint through the forest more

Run

Run

Run

Run

You keep running

You don't look where you're going

And then you

Run into

Papa

Again

“Watch where you go, Experiment Eleven!”

You gasp in shock and land on your back in the ground, looking up at Papa as he leers down at you.

“Did you really think I wouldn't just come back again?” Papa laughs coldly, sneering at you and sending another chill through your spine

Your mind is spinning

Memories growing

Darkness flooding

Oh no

Fuck

Not again

Not again

Not again

Not again

Not again

Not –

“Get up!”

The roar coming out of Papa's mouth is not just a mimicry of his voice

Or the soft echo of the Mind Flayer's voice

But it's a thousand voices converging into one

Mixing and mashing and screeching on your ears

You sob heavily, holding up you hand to stop him

But you can't reach

You can't send anything

You're too afraid

Everything paralyzes you

Paralyzes you too much

“Get up, Eleven! We have work to do!”

That phrase snaps in your head and flicks off a switch

Fear ebbs out of your body

And is rapidly replaced by hate

Hate and anger and *fury*

You slowly rise to your feet, glaring at him from beneath your eyelids, your hair starting to whip against your neck as you steady yourself

And

Raise

Your

Hand

“Papa” backs up in fear, eyes widening, mimicking human behavior quite well, all things considered. You continue to glare at him, now sending wave after wave of energy from your hand, dissolving him in to dust and ash that floats down to the ground

Another primal scream fills your ears

You shout

The world turns

Upside

Down

You realize you’re hanging from the ceiling

Except now the ground is the ceiling

And your hair is hanging from your head

You want to jump down to where gravity is pulling you

But you can't

Because *that's where the sky is*

And you scream in shock

The trees around you start to *melt*

The dirt itself starts to dissolve

Parts of the sky swirl above your head like in a whirlpool

And it looks like the hills in the distance are bulging out in your vision

Like everything is twisting up and turning about around you

You scream again

And again

And again

And you try to shoot out energy but you can't do anything

So you run, upside down

The ground turns vertical

So you start running up

But you're getting out of breath

You can barely breathe

Suddenly you're on top of a mountain

You look down below and the new? Ground seems to be slipping farther and farther and farther away –

Farther and farther and farther away –

You turn around and see nothing but swirls of color and reality
behind you

So you jump

You land on your feet, lightheaded and dizzy from all the screaming
and falling, and you're back in the forest again

So you start backing up, looking around for any sort of landmark that
will help you find your way around

Find your way back to the others

If they're still around

The thought sends pain straight through your heart, but you can't
focus on that now

You can't

You can't

You can't

You can't

You keep running through the forests, trees surrounding you on every side, but you can't find any sort of recognizable spot

You can't see anything

And the world still seems wibbly around you

Too wibbly

Too too too wibbly –

Nausea fills you from every corner, but you try to hold it back

You keep your hand over your mouth and you breathe in and out as slowly as you can

The cold is helping with the nausea, even if the terrible, sickly air is making it worse

So it evens out

In a way

You lean against a tree, staring at your shoes, when you hear it

A scream

A *human* scream

Someone else is still

Out there!

You shout in joy and start running as fast as you can in the direction of the scream

Running through the nausea and the fear and the pain and the wibbly

You keep running and then you reach a small clearing in the forest

Where a large, large, *large* cloud of smoke seems to surround someone you can't quite make out through the darkness

You hold up your hand and shoot it forward, and briefly the smoke and the wibbly stops

Just for a moment

Revealing Lucas within the cloud

He jumps to his feet, looking at you in shock and running over to hug you.

“You’re okay!” he gasps, pulling back and staring at you, “You’re *okay!*”

“Yes, I’m okay,” you breathe out, “What happened?”

“I don’t know, just one minute there’s an explosion and the next I’m... surrounded,” Lucas breathes.

“By smoke?”

“No... by Max’s Dad,” Lucas responds, frowning, “What – did it look like smoke?”

“Yeah,” you sigh, “The Mind Flayer is playing tricks on us all, trying to get us to destroy ourselves.”

Lucas groans, holding his head in his hands and pacing around you.

“Come on,” you sigh, “We have to find the others.”

Lucas nods, and you both keep walking through the forest, hearing nothing, but at least the wibbly has calmed down considerably and your stomach has stopped churning, too.

Eventually, you hear crying – *sobbing* – from a corner of the forest. You and Lucas look at each other in shock, and then take off sprinting towards the sound, your heart in your throat again as you trip over roots and smash into trunks, not really watching where you’re going, just concerned with getting there as quickly as possible.

Lucas reaches the edge of the quarry first, and you’re there with him, and you both look in shock at the sight –

Mike, sobbing into his hands, shaking back and forth on the ground –
And Eric, lifeless, on the rocks next to you.

“Wh... what?” you ask quietly.

Mike looks up, his eyes widening when he sees you.

“Jane – Jane – Jane –“

He runs towards you and grabs you, pulling you into a tight hug. You start sobbing, pulling back from him and looking at him in shock.

“What happened? Mike, what happened?”

“The m-m-m-mind flayer kept t-t-t-trying to get me to kill myself, kept t-t-t-t-trying to throw me off the cliff,” Mike sobs, “And then... Eric found me and... he... used his energy to save me from the fall... but it was too much... and he died... and then the mind flayer said it was...”

“He said it was your fault,” Lucas groans. Mike nods rapidly in response.

“It’s not your fault,” you say earnestly, grabbing onto Mike’s shoulders as tightly as you can, “Okay, Mike? It’s not your fault.”

He nods, but nothing changes behind his eyes.

“Look, we can freak out about this later,” Lucas says, “I’m sorry, man, but we’re running out of time.”

Mike nods, wiping off his nose on his sleeve, still shaking madly. You kiss him, hoping it will help – *begging* for it to help – but he just looks the same as you pull back. A long sigh escapes your lips, but you grab Mike by the wrist and drag him along anyway.

“Where would the others be, if not here?” Lucas asks as you all keep walking, Mike silently looking at his shoes and shaking from head to foot.

“I don’t know, but –“

You hear another shout in the distance and all take off running, thankfully even Mike, down the echos of the streets in your world, through the woods, through the endless expanse of dark and cold and fog. Eventually you return back to the original field, where everyone is waiting, looking at you three with relief on their faces.

“Thank God – Where’s Eric?” Wiconi asks.

Mike bursts into more tears as Lucas explains, tiredly, what happened.

“Well shit,” Kali whispers.

“We can still do this,” Will counters.

“*How?*”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Did you all get taken, too?” you ask quietly.

“Yes,” Max says softly, “Yes, we did.”

You turn around, facing the sky, where nothing can really be seen.

“HEY, UGLY.”

“Jane, what are you –“

You wave your hand around and continue to glare at the sky.

“WHERE ARE YOU, YOU ASSHOLE?”

Mike stares at you with his mouth wide open.

“COME ON OUT! OR ARE YOU TOO TIRED?” you scream.

Everyone keeps protesting, and you keep ignoring them.

“I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU WERE A *GOD!*”

A rumble echoes around you.

The shadows start to creep in again.

The diamond appears from the sky, peering down at you all, and the anger radiating from it sends more chills up and down your spine that you fiercely ignore.

You're done.

You're done with this.

You're done with this!

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

You grab a grenade out of your back and fling it directly into the monster. The monster screams, that same scream as before, but you ignore it, and you walk back to your friends.

“Well? Throw everything we've got!” you shout.

Dustin runs up immediately, pulling out another grenade and throwing it into the monster. It explodes, and the monster is too distracted from the fire to be ready for it, and simply shakes and rumbles rather than send everyone backwards. Max and Dustin follow suit, and you turn back to Will and Wiconi and Kali and Mike.

“Will, what is he thinking now?” you ask sharply.

“He's in pain,” Will answers simply, “And he's *fucking pissed*.”

“Good,” you snarl, “He gets irrational just like the rest of us.”

“Just like you're being right now? Sister, we have to –“

“Wiconi, you have a point, but we don't have time to lose. Kali, can you pull off another hallucination?” you ask. Kali nods rapidly.

“Good. Make him think he's surrounded by fire.”

Kali grins and walks past you, raising up both of her gloved hands above her head. She breathes in deep as the non-psychics send wave after wave of explosives at the Mind Flayer, that he continuously

succumbs to, unable to get a breath in otherwise.

And then the monster starts another scream

The scream causes all the trees, bushes, mountains, *ground* to shake

And shake

And shake

And shake

You all fall to the ground, except Kali, who keeps sending the hallucination. You force yourself to your feet and grab onto Mike, helping him up with you, before turning to Will.

“What is he thinking now?” you demand, holding your hands over your ears, though it doesn’t do any good.

“He’s not thinking anything! He’s just in too much pain!” Will shouts.

You sigh and nod.

“Right. Okay.”

You turn to Mike.

“You know what our end plan is, right? You remember that, right, Mike?” you beg. He is still crying.

“Mike!”

His head snaps up and he looks at you in shock.

“Mike, *do you remember?*” you whisper, holding onto his shoulders tightly.

Mike watches you for a long minute

“Yes. I do.”

“Good. Follow me.”

You grab his hand, and take off running through the woods. You keep running as fast as you can, watching the monster all the while, watching as it shakes and quakes and screams and screams and screams and screams.

The world around you somehow grows colder.

“I think he’s drawing up the last of the energy this place has,” Mike whispers behind you.

“Then we’re almost done,” you say, looking at him, “Mike, we can do this.”

Mike opens his mouth for a minute

As if to retort

As if to say something else

But then he watches your face

For a second

More seconds

A full minute

The world screaming and writhing around you

And finally

He stands up straighter

Visibly swallows

And nods

“You’re right. We can do this.”

He pulls you in for a long kiss

That makes you squeak

Even in this darkness

And you grin

And he grins back

And you keep running

And running

And running

And running

Bobbing and weaving through the densely packed trees

Barely able to see in front of you in the darkness

But you keep going, hands linked, running as fast as you can through the forest

Until you reach the foot of a nearby hill

Mike starts to sprint up the hill and you follow him, the monster still being bombarded with explosives by the rest of the team back in the clearing

And you reach the top of the hill together, panting and out of breath, and you drink the water you have in your bags and eat the last of the food.

“Jane.”

You look up at Mike.

“Mike?”

“I love you.”

He looks at you desperately

And you know that this is it

This is the last push

So you smile weakly back at him

And whisper, "I love you."

You kiss again

You can't help it

Before turning to face the monster

"HEY, DICKHEAD!"

The monster starts to turn to face you, still clearly in pain, unable to react much more than movement.

"LOOKING FOR US?" You scream.

The monster lets out another roar

And reaches out with his tendrils

So you raise up your arms and you pull

Pull

Pull

Pull

PULL

Mike does the same next to you, the two of you in identical positions, arms outstretched, blood pouring from your noses, dark lines painting across your faces

And you keep pulling the monster

Apart in space

Apart in time

Stretching its essence from itself

The monster keeps screaming and swiping

The world around you shakes and shakes and shakes

“KEEP GOING!” Mike screams

So you keep going

And going

And going

Twisting the monster in and out of itself as much as you can like
some sort of demon pretzel

Parts of the monster being sent all over time

Mike starts to scream loudly next to you in pain

And you find yourself matching him

And the monster swipes at you with a tendril

Trying to knock you over

And you cry out and fall to the ground as a result,

Losing your momentum

And Mike falls with you

So you hold up your hand from the ground and twist the monster
around even more

And the monster keeps screaming

And you keep screaming

And you're worried you're going to pass out

And you can feel your heart going so fast in your chest you're

worried it's going to explode

And you need help

You need help

You need help

You need help

Suddenly the smoke surrounds you on all sides, wrapping around you just like before

And you sob heavily

You weren't strong enough

You weren't strong enough

You couldn't kill him fast enough

You feel Mike bump into you as the monster wraps you up together

And roars in your ears so loudly they won't stop ringing

I W I L L M A K E Y O U B R A T S W I S H Y O U ' D N E V E R B E E N B O R N

You scream in terror

The monster starts to pull you apart

And pull Mike apart next to you

You feel your body stretch

And your limbs start to go

In weird places

Limbs are not supposed to go

And they stretch

And they tangle

And you scream

And the pain burns into your brain

It hurts more than anything you've felt before

And you scream and scream and scream

Just end it

Just end it

Just end it

JUST END IT –

“HEY!”

The pain stops

Just for a second

You turn around to look

And you see Dad standing on the hill

Looking up at you all

Desperately

With a flamethrower in his hands

“LET. MY. DAUGHTER. GO.”

The monster hisses at him

WHY WOULD I DO THAT

“Because I will blow up this *entire planet* with *you on it* if you so much as *harm a hair on her head!*” Dad screams.

YOU WOULDN'T –

“I FUCKING WOULD!”

He pulls out a large pack of gunpowder and his lighter, staring up at the monster.

Your heart lodges in your throat

“CHIEF, NO –“ Mike screams

“LET THEM GO!”

YOU WON'T –

“DAD!”

“I’LL GIVE YOU UNTIL THE COUNT OF THREE!”

“CHIEF, PLEASE!

YOU ARE BLUFFING

“ONE –“

“DAD, DAD, DAD –“

YOU WOULDN'T HURT THEM TOO –

“PLEASE, HOPPER –“

“TWO!”

YOU WOULDN'T HURT YOUR WIFE!

“DAD, DON'T –“

“TH –“

Suddenly, you're dropped to the ground with Mike, everything aching, but you crawl to your feet

And the smoky tendril reaches out

You try to stop it, reaching out with your hand

But it passes in a blur

Dad is picked up

The monster roars in fury

And smashes him against the ground.

It's like there's ringing in your ears.

Everything turns white.

You can hear Mike screaming.

You can hear everyone screaming.

You can hear yourself screaming.

Everything twists inside you

You can barely register what you're doing anymore

But it bubbles

And bubbles

And bubbles

Your eyes snap open

You see just the Mind Flayer

And it stares back at you

And before it can do anything else

Before it can hurt anyone else

You let out a primal scream

And explode

The monster screams in pain so white-hot it almost hurts you

Almost

And you watch

Unfeelingly

As the smoky tendrils dissolve

And the smoky body dissipates

And the head itself vanishes

Leaving behind empty air

A world, dead, cold, but normal cold now – the cold of the darkest winter nights

And everything eerily silent.

You fall to your knees, holding your head in your hands, sobs ripping through your body. Mike runs to you, wrapping his arms around you, holding you and rocking you back and forth.

“Jane.... Jane... you did it, Jane... you did it...”

You let out another sob.

“You did it... you did it... He’s gone... you did it...”

You look up at Mike for a long time.

Mike looks at you.

The relief flooding your chest mixing in with the grief, swirling around each other, forming a cloud in your stomach and chest.

And you collapse into his chest, crying until you have nothing left.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm just going to drop this and dance away

Just the epilogue left, folks...

Please comment!

45. Step Four

Notes for the Chapter:

Content Warning for mentions of past trauma and mental illness, as well as Excessive Cuteness

Also, a bunch of Hebrew at the end there, sorry about that

N O V E M B E R 3 1 9 9 7

M I K E L E V I N S O N

“Ten years now since the freak winter that swept the entire planet, climate scientists have coalesced together to discuss its potential implications on the global warming crisis. Vice President Al Gore is scheduled to deliver some choice remarks on the lasting ecological impact this freak event has left on the country, especially those regions which –“

The TV clicks off next to you, leading to the sounds of bird chirping filling your ears. and you look up at Jane, who’s staring down at you and frowning.

“Mike, what did we talk about?”

“Not to watch reports on it...”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s almost the day and we shouldn’t be upsetting ourselves needlessly...”

“Exactly,” Jane sighs, “Besides, you’re going to be late for work.”

You nod, getting up and walking over to your bedroom, reaching in to the closet and pulling out a tie. As you pass the living room, Eddie and Chester chirp after you, along with their new friends, Naomi and Bettie.

You say friends, but you're ninety-nine percent sure chicks are on the way.

Jane follows you into your room, hovering behind you and smiling a little.

"I do like that one."

You turn around and grin at her, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she laughs, "It matches your beard."

"Oh geez – is this your not-so-subtle way of hinting to me that I should trim it?"

"I plead the fifth."

You grin at her, leaning in for a kiss, before returning to tie the tie and straighten out your shirt.

"How do I look?" you ask, spreading your arms out from side to side. Jane cocks her head to the side before smiling at you again.

"Like a High School Biology Teacher."

"Oh good, I was worried I'd look like an elementary school teacher."

"Don't worry, there isn't enough paint on your shirt for that."

"Just formaldehyde?"

"Exactly!"

She reaches out to ruffle your hair, before turning away. You watch her shoulders heave slightly as she sighs so quietly you *might* have missed it.

But you didn't.

"Jane..."

"Sorry, Mike. You know this day is hard for me."

“I *do* know, which is why we’re doing this now...”

“Exactly. So I’m stressed on top of it.”

You sigh, “Should we have scheduled it earlier? We *had* been thinking about Halloween –“

“No, no,” Jane says, shaking her head, “No. This is better. I promise. I just... Today’s going to be a rougher day. But I’ll get through it.”

“Alright, well have a good day at school,” you reassure, leaning in to kiss her again, “Crush it, teach all those idiots that girls *can* do math, et cetera.”

Jane snorts, “I’ll try.”

You kiss her one last time, unable to stop yourself, murmuring “I love you” softly as you start to walk towards the door of your apartment.

“I love you,” she calls after you, and when you turn around to smile at her, she has a genuine smile on her face in response.

It makes you just that much warmer inside.

You go down the stairs, jump into your car, and start driving through the city traffic, grumbling as the cars crowd around you on every side. The tall buildings loom around you, almost making you feel suffocated, but after living here for four years, you don’t really notice it much anymore. People honk at you, and city busses crowd around you, but you just keep chugging along through the city.

Eventually you manage to reach the parking lot for your school, pulling up into one of the faculty parking spots and gathering your bag. The stiffness of your pants strikes you, a fact you would usually respond with a thought of *I need fabric softener*, but instead you just feel like you should be sixteen again. Sixteen, wearing loose jeans, staring out into the snow with Jane, watching as the shadows grew long over the grave.

But no – you’re twenty-six, and you have to go to work.

“Michael –“

You bristle a little, but turn around and give your best fake smile to the Principal, walking towards you through the entrance hall.

“Yes, George?”

“I want you to join the meeting about Ingrid Wilks, you *do* have her for science and while you haven’t noticed one of the cheating incidents, I feel –“

“You know, sir,” you begin, straightening up a little bit, “I’ve often found that students who resort to cheating feel pressure at –“

“Michael,” the Principal snaps, making you shrink back a little, “We’ve discussed this. It’s against the school ethics code and it will be met with harsh consequences, no exceptions. I *will* see you in my office this afternoon at *four*.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Have a good day!”

The Principal waves and continues walking down the hall, and you just watch him go with a slight glare, shaking your head back and forth. Eventually you start towards your own classroom, sitting at your desk and rolling up to your computer.

Almost as if on cue, your phone starts ringing. You grumble, look at the caller ID, and groan as you pick up the phone.

“Dustin, what on Earth –“

“SO okay I know you remember this *obviously* but I have to set the stage – it’s the ten year anniversary of –“

“Yes, *I know*.”

“And they were doing coverage of it on the Hawkins TV station, right, and they do the usual thing where they cut to the national footage before starting the local take, and before they cut away Troy’s face is like, you know, normal color, pale and everything –“

“*Why* are you bringing up *Troy* to me right now?”

“Because he’s relevant. Anyway, so the national story plays, freak winter yadda yadda yadda, what does this mean about the validity of *gloooobaaaaal waaaaarmiiiiing* and what does it mean about the future of *glooooooobal agricultuuuuure* –“

You can almost hear Dustin waving his arms around like a madman.

“And finally they cut back to Troy and you would *not* be able to guess how *red* his face was!”

“Was it as red as a tomato?” you respond tiredly.

“It was as *red* as a *tomato*!”

“That’s great, Dustin –“

“And Troy just starts *ranting* at the top of his lungs about how the people of Hawkins know the *truth* of what happened and that it does a disservice to every person who lost their lives to the weirdness and how eventually the rest of the world will have to wake up and, oh man, Mike, if you had seen it –“

“I’m sure it was hilarious...”

“I’m just glad no one watches these reports outside of Hawkins, like, do I *want* the world to acknowledge what went down? Of *course* –“

“You’ve dedicated a career to it,” you point out.

“Exactly! But, some random news anchor ranting like a lunatic? *Not* the way to go. You know?”

“Yeah, yeah, I do know,” you laugh, “Look, Dustin, you know I love to hear from you, man, but my first class starts in like, five minutes –“

“Right right right. Well we’re all ready down here for your visit in two weeks!”

“*Visit*?”

“You *are* visiting!”

“Yes. And doing some other things.”

“I’m just saying, visit summarizes all of it. Anyways, we’re all ready and prepped. So much prepping –“

“You better be, Jane’s been calling you nonstop for weeks about this.”

“And I’ve been doing everything! With Joyce’s help. And you would **not** believe how much Jamie loves to help with the streamers!”

“Oh, trust me, I can imagine,” you reassure, a smile coming onto your face before you can stop it, “Don’t worry, we’re excited for... everything.”

“And nervous, right?”

You find yourself unable to answer.

“Don’t worry, man, everyone gets nervous –“

“But what would I have to be nervous about? We’ve been living together for four years, and well, you know what we’re like –“

“Oh *trust* me, I know. But it’s still nervewracking. It’s like, we’ve been on this roller coaster called life together for so long, but now we’re definitely going to be on the ride together for the rest of the time, and you know, we might even build new tracks for us to go down, and it’s just a lot to take on and –“

“Thank you, Dustin,” you groan, holding your head in your hands, “Yes, that would in fact be it.”

“Anyway, we’re all ridiculously pumped for you to come in from Chicago, and we hope you haven’t gotten too used to big city life to enjoy your visit home!”

“Don’t worry,” you laugh, “We’re really excited to visit home.”

“Hooray! I’ll let you get to those young impressionable minds! Don’t screw it up!”

“... Thank you, Dustin. I won’t.”

The phone clicks and you set down yours, rolling your eyes in amusement as your freshmen start rolling in, a bunch of wide-eyed and fresh-faced fourteen (and fifteen) year olds all chatting eagerly and rough housing. You stand up and start writing about genetics on the chalkboard, ignoring the general commotion as you get down all the information.

“Alright, students, let’s listen up and get to work!”

Groaning fills your ears and you snort.

“Today’s Monday, which means...”

You look around at the students expectantly, and none seem to move much of a muscle. Suppressing an external groan, you offer up, “Which *means* we’re going to have a *brief* lecture, before we break off into groups to work on problems, and then at the end of the class someone is in charge of presenting a current topic in biology. Who is on for this week?”

One student – Ricky – raises up his hand reluctantly. You smile at him in response.

“Great! Alright, let’s talk *genetics*!”

The rest of the class goes by in a blur, with students actually working on their problem sets, and even somewhat *quietly*, so you’re able to sit back and work on the same stupid thing you’ve been working on for *months* and unable to perfect, and now you have two weeks and you’re starting to panic –

The little alarm on your desk goes off, and you stand up, holding your hands above your shoulders to indicate it was time to calm down. The students all settle, at least, for the most part, and Ricky comes to the front of the room.

“Today I’m going to talk about Global Warming, a science that everyone is arguing about all the time on the news so it probably is important. Global Warming is –“

You groan inside, wishing you could just tune out the presentation – at least the part where the student would *inevitably* bring up the “controversy” – but you pay attention instead, forcing yourself to listen to the entire thing, and grade the student fairly.

How would he know any better, after all?

“Thank you, Ricky, for that thorough –“

“Mr. Levinson?”

You look out at the giggling group of trouble-making kids in the back corner, sighing before you can stop yourself.

“Yes, Jenny?”

“You believe in global warming, right?”

The giggling increases.

“Yes, Jenny, I do.”

The laughter continues, now more obvious.

“But – you were *around* ten years ago –“

“So were you, Jenny.”

“Yes but, like, *around-around*, ten years ago, you *saw* all the snow –“

“Yes, I did.”

“So why are you delusional?”

You pinch the bridge of your nose with your fingers and let out a very long, audible sigh.

“Jenny, see me after class about your conduct.”

She glares at you from under thick eyebrows.

“To answer your question, did you know that the more proper name for this phenomenon is *climate change*, not global warming?”

Everyone quiets down, watching you with wide eyes. Ricky quickly returns to his seat. Jenny stops glaring for a fraction of a second, but returns to her scowl, probably hoping you hadn't noticed the change.

"Climate change meaning that the effects we people have had on the way the planet's ecosystem works is causing long-term changes in the climate of the planet as a whole. Basically, our activity, as people, is slowly changing the very fabric of our sky," you explain. Some students still look skeptical. Others look terrified. Others are in awe, or enraptured, as the words escape your lips.

"So, in fact, we wouldn't see immediate, obvious change ten years ago – or even today – or tomorrow, but in years and years from now. We'll start seeing more freak storms, perhaps more forest fires and hurricanes, and even – yes, even – large winter storms in certain areas."

"What... caused the big winter ten years ago, Mr. Levinson?" another student, Cathy, asks shyly.

"We... don't know," you answer, "Some say a mini Ice Age. Others say a solar flare. Most people are stumped, though. And it's still affecting our global food production today."

You tilt your head at Cathy and grin, an idea lighting up in your head.

"Cathy, it's your turn next week. If you don't mind the input, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the global food crisis."

Cathy beams at you and nods, her dreadlocks bouncing around her face. Jenny still scowls at you, though, but you'll take every little victory you can. The bell rings, and everyone eagerly starts running out of the room, so you turn back to your desk to pull back out your notes –

"Mr. Levinson?"

You look up to see one of Jenny's friends, Luke, looking at you from behind a stack of books clutched tightly to his chest.

"What's up, Luke? You should have a class in the next few minutes –"

“I... I know... but I wanted to talk to you...”

You sit down, staring at Luke in concern, “What’s wrong, Luke?”

Luke takes a deep breath and taps his fingers against his books rapidly, looking around the room for another minute before walking closer to where you are sitting.

“I... um... people say that you talk to students a lot about... their mental health?”

“I minored in psychology in college,” you explain, “So, yes, yes I do. I even include it a little in the advanced biology class.”

“Okay, so, you know... stuff. About being... crazy.”

“Luke,” you answer seriously, “Everyone is crazy. Life makes you crazy. But only some people are sick.”

Luke smiles a little, “Alright.”

“What’s on your mind?”

Luke takes a long pause, and you just watch him, waiting for him to start talking, glad you don’t have a second period class but worried about what second period class *he* probably has and –

“I know you and Jenny don’t get along but I’m really worried about her!”

He blurts this out, panic etched across his face, and you smile kindly at him in response.

“Take your time, Luke.”

Luke takes a deep breath and nods, starting to pace back and forth in front of you across the classroom.

“So like... I don’t know. I like to hang out with Jenny. She’s cool. We do a lot of things together... like go to the park... or the White Hen... or the library... we sometimes,” he lets out a laugh, “Like to go downtown and watch tourists do stupid tourist things –“

“Luke, as heartwarming as this is to hear...”

“Right, right, right, right, right, okay, so, I really care about... her... and... uh...” his words seem to surprise him, and he stumbles over his own sentence as a result, so you just smile nicely at him to encourage him to continue talking.

“I’m just... her parents are kind of a complete mess, you know? They’re real pieces of work, and they just... they keep yelling at her, and expecting too much of her, and it’s really stressing her out, and she keeps talking about how she like, doesn’t want to deal with it anymore, and she talks about running away all the time before she like decides that she wouldn’t be able to do it, and so then she just gets *really sad* and I’m worried she’s...”

He trails off, looking at a spot next to your head rather than your face. You frown a little, but as comfortably as you can muster.

“I’m worried she might hurt herself,” he finally whispers.

“Okay, Luke, first I want you to take a deep breath, okay?”

He nods, closing his eyes tightly and breathing in deeply.

“Alright. Do you have any evidence that she’s hurt herself, or is planning to hurt herself? Like, a full distinct plan, or mentioning off hand that she’d like to do some self destructive ask, really, anything,” you ask.

“Uh... I don’t know. I haven’t seen her do anything, and I don’t... *think* she has a specific plan or anything like that...”

“Okay, that’s fine. Have you tried to talk to her about her feelings?” you ask.

Luke’s eyes widen and he shakes his head rapidly.

“No, no, she’d *kill* me.”

“You don’t need to sit down and say ‘hey, let’s talk about our feelings.’ But you could take advantage of a moment where she’s already opening up,” you explain.

“Oh...”

“You don’t have to, of course. But you definitely should try to be kind to her at all times... and validate her, you know?”

“Validate... her?”

“Remind her that you’re glad she’s in your life, that you care about her, and that she brings a lot to the world.”

“Um... okay...”

He’s blushing furiously, and you smile kindly at him.

“I know, it sounds crazy, but I promise it works. It helps. People in dark spots need to hear reminders that they’re needed and cared about.”

Luke nods, starting to edge towards the door.

“Oh, and Luke?”

He turns back to face you.

“If you ever notice signs that it’s getting worse – you see that she’s hurt herself, or she talks about having very distinctive eplans, that sort of thing – please tell me or another teacher immediately. We don’t want her to get hurt.”

Luke nods rapidly.

“Thank you, Mr. Levinson.”

“You’re welcome, Luke. Now get to your next class, okay? Here’s a note.”

You scribble an explanation on a sheet of paper and hand it to him. He smiles at you, and runs out into the hallway. You lean back in your chair, smiling a little.

Your job did have its moments when you *knew* you were doing some good.

JANE HOPPER

It is a chilly day, so you walk through the pathways of your university bundled up, your scarf tightly wrapped around your neck. Granted, of course, that you have been fairly sensitive to *any* cold for about ten years, but you *know* you would have been chilled by this weather before then too, probably, definitely?

Reaching the mathematics building, you scurry inside, up the stairs, and reach your computer. Eagerly logging on, you watch as the monitor whirs to life, and the modem hums as it connects to your phone.

Thirty new emails. Mostly spam. You delete them all, apart from an email from your advisor, another from Mike because of course he sent you a love email while at work, and one from Jamie.

Jane,

When you come home don't blame me for the fact that there's cat fur all over your bed I'm sorry I know you hate cats but I have to babysit Mary Jane's cat and it's a pain sorry!

Love,

Jamie

You snort quietly to yourself and respond,

Jamie,

You have two weeks you can't clean it up?? Yeesh!

Love,

Jane

You set up your calculator to try and work through your current proof, when a knock rings out on your door, making you jump a little in your seat.

"Uh... come in!"

Your advisor, Dr. Baez, opens the door, smiling at you.

“Hello Jane. May I come in?”

“Of course.”

He comes in and sits across from your desk pulling out a paper and leaving it in one of the rare empty corners.

“Read this before our meeting on Wednesday, I think it’ll really help with your current sticking spot.”

“Sure thing.”

He frowns at you, and you try to paint your expression into one of neutrality, to no avail.

“Jane, I know you’re distracted from your personal life right now, but you assured me you’d be able to get through the next few weeks before –“

“Yeah, I can. I promise. This... isn’t about that.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Memories start to flash in quick succession in your head. Memories of demo-monsters and infinite snow and paralyzing fear and –

“Uh... it’s... the ten year anniversary... of... of when my dad...”

“Right, right. I’m sorry, Jane, I admit I forgot. I shouldn’t have.”

“Thanks...”

“You can take the rest of the day off if you want to.”

“No, I want to push through. I am about to take off a couple weeks, after all, so I have a lot of work to do before I leave,” you respond earnestly.

“Alright...”

You turn back to your computer, typing away, but Dr. Baez continues

to sit there across from you, studying you closely.

“Is that... all?” you ask as politely as you can.

“Jane, may I ask why you don’t socialize with the other graduate students?”

Oh come *on*.

Not this conversation *again*.

“Sir, you know why.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned your post-traumatic stress multiple times, and I admire that you care about the comfort of your fellow students in that being your primary motivation for having your own office, but it’s still an important part of the graduate experience. It helps you build connections and contacts for when you graduate, your cohort can aid you in solving those tough problems, and oftentimes you can hear about new opportunities by talking with them. Also, of course, it’s important to build social connections in the workplace, in general.”

You let out a long sigh.

The last time you socialized with your coworkers, they either were in the camp of ‘nerdy boys who never talked to anyone in their lives amazed at the presence of a girl and thus constantly belittling you *and/or* hitting on you’ or ‘trying to uncover your mysterious tragic backstory and getting annoyed when you wouldn’t talk about it’. There was no in between.

“Sir, I just...”

You watch him for a second before finishing your sentence.

“I just... don’t get along with them.”

Dr. Baez lets out a long sigh.

“Alright, well, I do hope you’ll be at the Mathematics Department Christmas Party –“

“I don’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Right, of course. I forgot.”

Kind of a tough thing to forget...

“We can put up some Chanukah decorations for you though –”

“Thanks. I’ll think about it. Have to see where my work is after my trip.”

“Of course, of course. See you on Wednesday. Do read that paper.”

“I will.”

He finally leaves your office, and you sit back in your chair, holding your hands behind your head and staring up at the ceiling. Taking a minute to compose yourself, you grab the paper from your desk and start studying it, reading it as slowly as you can, highlighting frequently, and taking notes.

Your dyslexia sometimes does get in the way of being a mathematician, after all.

Eventually, though, you *desperately* need coffee, so you walk out into the student common area and pour yourself a cup, trying to hide yourself from your coworkers, thinking about the calculus class you have to teach tomorrow –

“Hiiiiiiii Janey!”

Oh come *on*.

“Hi Rachel...”

“How goes *planning*! Eee I’m so excited for you!”

You finally turn to face the bubbly girl, her black hair tied back into a bun with pink streaks running through it now, as opposed to the red ones that had been there... a week ago? Two? You put on your best fake smile and beam back at her.

“Oh, you know, just one step at a time, that kind of thing.”

“Eeeeeee! I’m so *jealous*! I can’t believe you’re going all the way out to Indiana for it, though. There are some *really beautiful* places right here in Chicago –“

“Yeah, but our hometown is significantly cheaper,” you explain, for what feels like the millionth time, “We can book a *much* larger space for about half the cost, which we’re making up for in the other things we need to book.”

“*Yeaaaaaaaah* I guess you’d *knooooow* Miss Queen of Calculus,” Rachel sighs.

“Statisticians can do arithmetic too. I hope,” you joke. Rachel sticks her tongue out at you.

“Speaking of I better get back to work. See you around Janey!”

“Don’t...” you start, but she’s already out of the room as you finish “Don’t call me Janey.” Sighing, you turn back to your coffee, finish adding sugar and cream, and walk back to your office.

A long, *long* day of proofs and papers and calculations passes, but eventually you feel good enough about leaving that you walk through the campus, back through the chilly pathways, across and through throngs of far too cheerful undergraduates, until you reach the stop for the L and hop on, watching the city pass you by as it takes you across downtown and through to your neighborhood. Still ignoring how cold you are, you walk up the stairs of your apartment, fiddle with the keys, and enter the living room.

Bird cheeps immediately fill your ears and you grin, finally starting to ease up from the long day, and run to their cage. Chester, Eddie, Naomi, and Bettie are all eagerly waiting along the bars near the door, and you open it, allowing them all to fly out and about the room. While Eddie was normal looking for a cockatiel, with a grey body and bright orange cheeks, and Chester was mostly white with a yellowish head; Naomi was almost speckled, with spots of white and grey dotting her whole body, and Bettie was entirely grey, with grey cheeks and white patches on her wings. Luckily, it made telling them

all apart fairly feasible.

“Now you, Bettie,” you say sternly, taking her onto your finger and feeling a little around her legs, “You aren’t holding eggs on me are you?”

Bettie chirps at you, and you can feel the round shape there between her legs. You let out a very long, low sigh.

“Great. I really hope they aren’t, for your sake, fertilized, because your bird sitter is *not* going to be thrilled about chicks on her watch.”

Bettie chirps again, cocking her head to the side, and you laugh a little bit.

“Well, Natasha knows what she’s getting into, she runs the shelter after all. I’ll just warn her that you’ll probably be a mom,” you say, not as much to Bettie – who, while listening attentively, *cannot* understand you – but to yourself, writing down notes for yourself.

“I should probably get you into the vet to check on you, though, just in case – egg feels fairly normal but you never know...”

You start wandering about the apartment, cleaning up in random spots, crossing off another day on the calendar countdown, and allowing the four birds to land on and off of your head, flying around and squawking about your head. You shake your head in amusement and keep tidying up, oftentimes just standing in one spot and lifting and moving things without even lifting your hands. The birds, unphased, often would just fly around the seemingly flying objects. At one point, you’re sent into uncontrollable giggles as Chester sits on the broom handle as you sweep with your mind.

“Hoooneyyyy I’m hooooome!”

“Mike, you know I don’t understand that reference,” you laugh, eagerly running up to hug him as he enters the apartment. He squeezes you tightly, before walking up to each bird and saying hello.

“How was work today?” you ask him, sitting down on the couch with him, birds still flying about everywhich way.

"Mostly good. Worried about a student who another student thinks is in trouble, mental health wise," Mike begins, staring out in front of him with a frown, "But had a good discussion with my AP students about the ethics of genetic modification. And I managed to stand up for a student who was caught cheating because it was *obvious* her parents were putting her under an *extreme* amount of stress. The Principal wasn't happy but I made a compelling enough case that she's on probation rather than suspended and that's all I was aiming for. Hopefully that'll be enough to help her turn it around."

"I'm glad!" you respond eagerly, leaning over to kiss him, "I'm very proud of you, Mike."

"Thanks," he says, grinning, "How was your day?"

"Oh, you know. Math, math, my advisor expressing concern about my social health, math, a coworker being annoying, math, and more math," you say, rolling your eyes, "Nothing exciting to mention."

"You mean *you're* not excited about *math*?" Mike gasps dramatically.

"Ha *ha*," you snort, "Can you get started on dinner? I'm *starving*."

"Absolutely my dear," Mike says cheerfully, "Can you get the birds back in the cage? Hopefully *without* resorting to psychic powers –"

"I'll do my best but they're birds, I only have so much control!"

"Trust me, I am *aware*."

You both laugh eagerly with each other as you wrangle the birds back into the cage, Mike going to cook dinner as you continue studying the paper assigned earlier in the day.

After a nice evening of food, chatter, and fun, you settle together in bed, him grading student papers while you continue pouring over the reading. You've now used three different highlighter colors just to keep track of the different lines of thought, and you're grumpy that you have to finish this in a couple of days.

"Jane, I had a vision today."

“Oh?”

“I saw us, tomorrow, going on a walk along the lakefront trail, enjoying all the fall color, the leaves gently drifting down to the ground, watching the waves of the lake wash up on to the sandy shore – we’re holding hands, and smiling, and not worrying for –“

“Mike, we can’t.”

Mike gives you a pouty faced expression.

“Aww, come on! Why not?”

“First of all, you can’t call every desire you have a psychic vision, that lessens the importance of your *actual* psychic visions –“

“Party pooper!”

“And second of all, I have way too much work to do before we go to Hawkins, Mike, you know this! I have so many proofs I should wrap up to give to Dr. Baez to review before we leave town, I have to prep my notes for the person covering my class, I –“

“Yeah, yeah, I know, we just haven’t gone out and done anything fun in a while.”

“Yes, because we’ve had to spend all our free time *planning*.”

“Ugh.”

His word doesn’t match his tone or his expression as he beams at you, and you beam back despite yourself, leaning in to kiss him and wrapping your arms around him.

“We’re almost done. Just a few weeks left,” you whisper.

“Yeah. Hoo boy. Are you as nervous and excited as I am?” Mike asks.

“Probably, yeah, nervous and excited sounds right,” you agree.

“Which is why we should go for a walk!”

“Mike –“

“All work and no play makes Jane a sad woman and Mike a bored man!”

“You *cannot* keep making that joke –“

“I will make it until you finally react to it correctly!”

“Are you telling me how to react to your crappy jokes?” you laugh, doubling over on yourself as Mike continues to grin next to you.

“Yes. Yes I am.”

“I am utterly speechless –“

“And yet, you just spoke!”

You elbow Mike in the ribs and he does the same back, the two of you grinning at each other for a long moment. You then kiss and settle back into your work, Mike grumbling as he goes over a particularly bad paper for a long time, long enough for you to give the article another read-through.

A thought bubbles to the surface in your head, and you take a deep breath.

“Mike?”

“Mhm? Yes, sweetheart?”

You smile to yourself.

“I... uh... I’ve been thinking. About after.”

“Oh? Thought about another place to try and go?”

“No, actually, uh... I was talking to Rabbi –“

“Again?!”

“Yeah, again...”

“What did she say?”

“Well, she and I talked about... you know...”

“I... really don’t, Jane, I’m sorry –“

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, sorry. We talked about covering my hair.”

“Oh!”

“Yeah...”

“You... want to? Because I don’t need you too, I promise –“

“Mike, how many times do we have to go over this?” you sigh, “I didn’t convert *for* you. Sure, you helped my decision, and seeing how much you love Judaism helped *me* fall in love with it, but I converted *for myself*, because it felt like the right thing for me to *do*, and it helped me... manage my grief... ten years ago. More than any other way of thinking about it did. The added benefits of it helping synchronize our home life were just that – extra bonuses.”

“You’re right, Jane, I’m sorry,” Mike apologizes, leaning in to give you a kiss, “So you want to cover your hair?”

“I don’t even know! We aren’t orthodox, I don’t *have* to or anything like that, but I’ve been thinking about it, at least for some of the time. It’s not like traditional egalitarian Jewish women *don’t* cover their hair, they just... don’t always, and everything.”

“Well, why *might* you want to?”

“It’s meaningful? It connects me to the community? It designates the change in my life that’s coming up that... isn’t going to actually change very much else? Practically speaking? Also, tichels look pretty and I wouldn’t mind wearing them, at least from time to time.”

“No wigs?”

“Fuck, no, no wigs! I did that when I was twelve and I will *not* be doing it again!”

You both giggle together, laughing and poking each other playfully.

“Oh, Jane?”

“Yeah Mike?”

“On the drive over we’re listening to ‘Nevermind.’”

“Oh *come on!*”

“Yes! We are listening to that masterpiece!”

“I want to listen to ‘In Utero’!”

“We’re never going to agree on a Nirvana album, are we?”

“No, probably not!”

You both keep laughing together, until eventually you grow tired and finally fall asleep.

N O V E M B E R 1 6 1 9 9 7

“Come on, Jane, I wanna help you with your hair!”

You look over at Joyce, who rolls her eyes playfully at you and hands Jamie a comb. You grin down at Jamie and bend over a little so she can help comb your hair. Tall for her age (nine) and with long brown hair, she manages to reach your hair easily enough.

She looks so much like him.

“Alright Jamie, just comb it up into place there, Joyce can show you.”

“Mommy, lift me up!”

Joyce lifts Jamie up and they work together on your hair, putting it neatly into place against your scalp, the soft curls tumbling from the bun on the top of your head.

“Alright sweetie, good job!”

“Hooray!”

Joyce sets Jamie back down and Jamie beams at you, so you give her a tight hug in response.

“Come on now, Jane, you’re going to mess your dress!” Joyce reminds.

“I don’t care,” you laugh.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Jamie?”

“Why’d you name me a name so close to Jane’s?”

You and Joyce look at each other for a minute.

“Well, sweetie, Jamie for boys is often a shortening of the name James,” Joyce begins.

“Okay,” Jamie responds.

“And your father’s name was Jim, which is short for James,” Joyce finishes, smiling, “And, since you’d never get to meet him, we wanted to name you after your father.”

“That makes sense,” Jamie says, smiling, “What was he like?”

“A wonderful person,” you whisper hoarsely, smiling at Jamie, “And he helped make the world a safer place for you to be in.”

“How did he die?”

You and Joyce look at each other for a moment.

She was still too young to hear it.

Much too young.

To learn about any of it.

“One day, Jamie,” you start, looking straight into her brown eyes at her level, “I’ll tell you all about it. Every last detail. But it’s a really... scary story, and you’re only nine years old.”

Jamie pouts at you.

“But I promise, Jamie. Dad was great. And when you learn about him, you’re going to understand how great,” you say softly.

“Okaaaaay. I’m going to go talk to Nancy!”

Jamie hops out of the room, hair bouncing against her back, while you and Joyce smile at each other, before you go back to face the mirror, staring at your reflection, unable to really... move, much.

“He would have been so proud of you, you know,” Joyce murmurs.

“Yeah,” you sigh, “I know.”

“Going to college at *Princeton*, then University of Chicago for graduate school... well it’s more education than anyone’s gotten in his family, really,” Joyce continues.

You smile at her weakly, “Look, Joyce, I really appreciate this, I do, but kind of just... want to... focus on getting ready.”

“Right, I know. I know,” Joyce sighs, “I know you don’t like to talk about it.”

You let out another sigh.

“I should talk about him, I know I should, but... it just hurts too much. For me.”

“I understand, sweetie. But I do have one more thing to mention about him.”

“Okay?”

Joyce goes and reaches into her bag, pulling out a small object and holding it in her hand as she leans against the counter next to you.

“So, as you know, we’ve all known that you and Mike were a foregone conclusion from... well, the beginning,” Joyce introduces, making you snort.

“And I remember... very clearly. A conversion we had soon after we got married,” Joyce says, “Along with the whole, you know, do we want to have a child, what do we want to do in retirement, all those sorts of things –“

“That reminds me... I don’t think I ever asked you...”

“Asked me what, Jane?”

You frown, “Um... did Dad know... you were pregnant? Before the... before everything?”

Joyce sighs, “I didn’t even know, Jane. I only started getting morning sickness a few weeks later.”

“Yeah, that makes sense...”

“I wish he had known...”

“I think it would have made him really happy,” you murmur, “If there... is... something out there... then I bet he’s watching and is proud of how you’re raising her.”

“Thank you, Jane,” Joyce whispers, tears coming to her eyes as she kisses your forehead, “*Anyway*, let’s stop this. You’re right, you shouldn’t be thinking too much about it, not today.”

“Thanks, Joyce.”

“So, we talked about this day. And... he told me, explicitly, that he wanted you to wear this.”

Joyce holds out what was in her hand, and you see a small, blue bracelet. You put it on your wrist, turning it over to look at it.

“It was his daughter Sarah’s,” Joyce murmurs quietly.

You look up at her, tears coming to your eyes again.

“It was?”

“It was,” Joyce responds softly, “He... well. At the time, he didn’t

know your religious future, and at any rate, it's traditional among some cultures to wear something borrowed, and also to wear something blue. This is both."

You smile a little, looking up at Joyce with wordless joy.

"And he wanted you to wear it... because... well, he didn't go into it much. You remember how he was about... feelings," Joyce laughs weakly, and you laugh with her.

"But, he wanted you to wear it, I think, because he wanted you to know that he... he loved you unconditionally. You *are* his daughter. Blood or no blood. And I think you should wear it, to take a little piece of him with you up there."

You throw your arms around Joyce in a hug, and squeeze her tightly, before letting go and wiping off the tears from your eyes. Joyce does the same, and picks up some of the make-up tools on the counter.

"Come on now, let's fix up your face, we don't have a lot of time before you have to go out there!"

You grin and stick out your face, letting Joyce fix it up, feeling a warmth extend from your stomach – almost like you had been holding it back, and only now it could escape.

He was here with you today, in spirit, and that was enough.

Your friends and family were all here, and that was enough.

MIKE LEVINSON

You stand at one end of the building, shuffling your feet around, almost in a circle. You really can't stop pacing. Shit.

"Hey buddy, you okay?"

You turn to see Dustin, Lucas, and Will, standing behind you and grinning. Jonathan and Steve are there too, but a little bit of a ways back, deep in quiet discussion with each other.

"Hey guys, thanks. Yeah, I'm alright. Just nervous."

“What do *you* have to be nervous about?” Will laughs.

“You guys are soulmates,” Lucas agrees.

“It’s a big step, but you can do it,” Dustin finishes.

“Thanks, guys,” you respond, drawing in a deep breath, “I guess I’m also just ready to get going, you know?”

“Oh definitely,” Will groans.

“Which is why you’ll be *happy* to learn that we’re here to head in and hold up the chuppah with the girls!” Lucas cheers.

“Oh thank God,” you breathe, “Good luck lads.”

“Thanks, we’ll need it,” Dustin jokes. You elbow him a little, as Jonathan and Steve walk up to you and pat you on the shoulder.

“Ready man?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“You better not mistreat my lil’ sis,” Jonathan jokes.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Also, you’re dating my sister, too,” you point out, sticking your tongue out at him.

“Yeah, that would be why I wouldn’t have said anything,” Steve snorts.

“You promised no playful teasing until we got home,” Jonathan says, shaking his head, “You *know* it makes me get –“

“Please, please, *please*,” Dustin groans, covering his face with his hands, “Do *not* talk about your sex life. I am *begging* you.”

“Alright, alright!”

You just shake your head as you hear music start up in the main room. The five men walk past you, all grinning at you in varying degrees, walking out together towards the front of the room. You watch eagerly, seeing five women come from the other side – Max,

Nancy, Wiconi, Renee, and Kali. They meet the men in the middle, and all hold up the wedding canopy, made up of your tallit from your bar mitzvah, and Jane's from her bat mitzvah. You grin a little bit, now bouncing eagerly.

Another song starts playing. You take a deep breath, and start making your way towards the chuppah, looking up to see Jane approaching you from the other end. Her dress is long, covering her feet, and pale blue in color. Her hair is pulled up into a beautiful curly bun on the top of her head, and she grins at you the moment she sees you.

Your heart stops for just a second, but you keep walking, meeting Jane in the middle under the canopy. The Rabbi – Rabbi Spinoza – walks up in front of you both, nodding as everyone stand around you, your friends holding up the chuppah above your heads. You immediately hold Jane's hands in yours, facing her, with the Rabbi standing and facing the people sitting and watching behind you.

“*Shalom*, everyone. Welcome! Today we are going to celebrate the union between Jane Hopper – Rivka bat Avraham v'Sarah; and Michael Levinson – Mikha'el ben Shoshana. A couple that has been through *numerous* trials and tribulations, they have come out on the other side stronger, and we are thrilled, today, to join them together in marriage, here at this *kiddushin*. You can see here that the two of them stand underneath this wedding canopy, this *chuppah*. This chuppah symbolizes the home they are making together. They have their friends and family helping to hold up the chuppah – meaning that they realize that they need their friends in their lives, to help them build a strong home together.”

You turn and grin at your friends, and they grin back at you, all easily holding up the structure.

“Now, Mike and Jane are going to circle around each other seven times. This indicates that the two of them are recreating the creation of the world – as mythologized in our *Torah* – through their marriage to one another. If you two would like to continue.”

You start circling around Jane, and she circles around you, the two of you laughing and grinning at each other as you circle around, in a strange sort of concentric spiral shell, going around and around six

times separately. Soft music plays in the background, but you're only focusing on her, watching her face and unable to tear your eyes from her. On the seventh circle, you turn together, walking side-by-side before standing back in front of the Rabbi.

"Now, Jane and Mike will indicate the start of their marriage, and this holy moment in all of our lives, by performing a blessing over wine, and drinking that wine. They will be doing so out of two separate cups, to indicate that, until now, they had two individual lives... for the most part."

Everyone around you laughs, and you and Jane grin at each other a little bit. You pick up a goblet and Jane picks up one next to it, the two of you still grinning ear to ear. You say together, murmuring as one, "*Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam, borei p'ri hagafen,*" and drink in unison, before setting the cups back down on the table between you and the Rabbi.

"Now, I will bless this couple, for their betrothal to one another, with traditional words as agreed upon by Mike and Jane. Then, they will exchange simple rings, indicating to each other that they are bound to each other, in one of the oldest traditions and, theoretically at any rate, simplest traditions we have – marriage. *Harei at m'kudeshet li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael. Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitvotav v'tzivanu al haarayot, v'asar lanu et haarusot, v'hitir lanu et han'suim v'hansuot lanu al y'dei chupah v'kiddushin. Baruch atah Adonai, m'kadeish amo Yisrael al y'dei chupah v'kiddushin.*"

Jane reaches out for your hand and slips the ring onto your ring finger, murmuring, "*Harei atah m'kudah li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael.*" You grin at her and put her ring onto her finger, whispering in response, "*Harei at m'kudeshet li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael.*" The two of you lean towards each other automatically, as though to kiss, but manage to hold back, grinning at each other as the electricity crackles between you.

"Now, Jane and Mike will sign their *Ketubah*, their marriage contract. While there is a traditional portion to the *Ketubah*, they have asked for me to read aloud their personal section, which is below, prior to their signing."

She holds up the *Ketubah*, which is filled with Hebrew and then English lettering, with beautiful swirls of color surrounding the words. She then reads aloud, *"We promise together to stand by each other, for every day we have in the rest of our lives. We value our partnership, our teamwork, our ability to take the world together and support each other through it's trials. We look forward to cementing our partnership, to committing to it anew every single day, to creating **our** future, rather than individual futures. We will be there for each other, through each problem, each mental health dip, each moment of simple joy. We have survived through everything together, and now, we will thrive as a team, for the rest of our lives."*

You're crying a little bit, and so is Jane. You both lean over to sign the *Ketubah*, with both English and Hebrew names, and then straighten up to where you're standing.

"Now, before we move on to the seven blessings, they have indicated they wish to say some words of their own."

You turn to Jane, and she turns to you, and she takes a deep breath and opens her mouth.

"When we met, Mike, I was... lost. And scared. And everything was... terrifying. I had been hurt, badly, by the most important people in my life. And our first few years weren't walks in the park."

You laugh, even though you had promised yourself you wouldn't.

"But... we rebuilt each other – both during those years, and afterwards. I didn't know... how important it was... for me to find someone who understood all the pain I had been in. And it's thanks to you that I've been able to pull myself out of that pain, and become the person I am today. And I am so excited to spend the rest of our lives supporting each other, just as we always have done."

You beam at her, and she beams at you.

"Jane... I had been in pain, too. For my entire life. Perhaps not as much pain – no, definitely not as much pain – but a kind of pain that very few people understood. And then I found that... that you feel it, too," you say, wishing you could reach out to hold her. She smiles at

you through watery eyes.

“And you know, of course, how much that has helped me. Through our understanding, we have built each other up, and helped each other when we fall. And gotten through *so much*, together. It’s... going to be a wild ride, the rest of our lives together. But I know we will get through it, how we’ve gotten through everything else – by lifting each other up.”

Jane beams at you, and you beam at her.

“Thank you, Jane and Mike, for those beautiful words. We will now have the seven blessings, which symbolize important parts of one’s life – the ability to express joy, our wonder at the natural world, our creative abilities as people, how we, as people, strive towards goodness every day, the healing that comes from our relationships such as your relationship together, our joy that comes from lifelong commitments, and how much joy you both find in each other. Jane and Mike will say these blessings together, over a single cup of wine, which symbolizes how their lives are now one, together, a journey undertaken as a team.”

You both hold onto the wedding cup and hold it up together, reciting the words in unison, “*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, borei p’ri hagafen.*

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, shehakol bara lichvodo.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, yotzeir haadam.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher yatzar et haadam b’tzalmo, b’tzelem d’mut tavnito, v’hitkin lo mimenu banyan adei ad. Baruch atah Adonai, yotzeir haadam.

So stasis v’tageil haakarah, b’kibutz baneha l’tochah b’simcha. Baruch atah Adonai, m’samei-ach Tziyon b’vaneha.

Samei-ach t’samach rei’im haahuvim, k’sameichacha y’tzir’cha b’Gan Eiden mikedem. Baruch atah Adonai, m’samei-ach chatan v’chalah.

Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu Melech haolam, asher bara sason v’simcha chatan v’chalah, gilah rinah ditzah v’chedvah, ahavah v’achavah, shalom v’rei-ut. M’heirah, Adonai Eloheinu, yishama b’arei Y’hudah uv’chutshot Y’rushalayim, kol sason v’kol simcha, kol chatan v’kol kalah, kol mitzhalot chatanim meichupatam, un’arim mimishteih n’ginatam. Baruch atah Adonai, m’samei-ach chatan im

hakalah.”

You then drink the cup, you taking a sip and then her, placing it down on the table. The rabbi then holds her hands over both of your heads, and you bow together, holding each other’s hands tightly.

“Y’varech’cha Adonai v’yishm’recha,” the Rabbi sings, “Ya-eir Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka. Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v’yaseim l’cha, Shalom.”

You both look up, grinning at each other.

“And now,” the Rabbi announces, beaming out at everyone gathered, “We will do three of the most important things of all!”

You let out a laugh before you can stop yourself.

“I will, first, pronounce you both. Then, you can kiss, if you’d like. And then, together, Jane and Mike will smash a glass, to symbolize the connection Mike and Jane have with all of the Jewish people, as they start their Jewish home, together.”

Jane and you continue to hold hands, now looking over at the Rabbi together.

“Mike Levinson, Jane Hopper, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss – “

But you have pulled her into your arms and kissed her before she even finished, holding her tightly to you as you kiss deeply to the cheers of your friends and family. Will runs over with a glass in a padded bag, setting it down in front of you. You and Jane turn together and, her stomping her left foot and you your right (as she is on your right side), smash the glass with your feet.

“MAZEL TOV!” Bubbe shouts from the front row, and everyone starts singing and dancing as you both start walking together down the center of the room, clapping and singing and dancing filling your ears. You grin at each other and run off, reaching a small room to the side, with a couch, some Eggo waffles, and Star Wars playing on the TV.

Jane turns to you and grins at you from ear to ear, and you grin back, pulling her in for a long kiss.

“Well, we did it,” you laugh, grinning at her and bouncing on your feet.

“We did!” Jane giggles, “We’re married!”

“We are!”

“Ahhh!”

“Ahhh!”

You both giggle together more, sitting on the couch together and eating the eggos.

“I’m glad we have this moment before the reception,” Jane murmurs, resting her head in the crook of your shoulder and neck.

“Me too,” you murmur, nuzzling your face against the top of her head, “Me too. Thank you, Jewish people, for inventing the concept of *yichud*.”

“Amen,” Jane laughs.

A long moment passes as you watch Star Wars together, breathing easy, the weight of anxiety lifting off of your shoulders.

“Jane?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. So much.”

She turns and beams at you, drawing you in for a long kiss.

“I love you, Mike. So much.”

And you grin at each other, basking in the peace of this moment.

Everything is okay.

Maybe not perfect, but okay.

And that was good enough for you.

END OF PART FOUR

Notes for the Chapter:

Holy. Shit. We've reached the end of the story.

First of all, I recognize that you guys want to know what the other major characters are up to, and I was going to write that in organically, but UNFORTUNATELY FOR ALL OF US I was already past 9k words for this epilogue and I couldn't justify adding more. So,

Jonathan, Steve, and Nancy all live together, still, in Hawkins – Jonathan running a photography store, and Nancy working for the local newspaper. Steve and Dustin, together, run a Paranormal Detective Agency for the town, which still had weird things happen from time to time. Lucas and Max live together in New York City, Max as a social worker, Lucas as an astronomer. Will and Rico live together in San Francisco, running their own Art Studio. Wiconi is a major leader on her reservation, helping to rebuild the town and the people, with her girlfriend, Izzy. Bubbe and Zayde live with Karen and Holly, Holly now nearly ready to go to college herself. Joyce and Jamie live nearby, and spend most of their time with the Levinson family. Kali is off getting her psychology degree. Mpilo and Renee and Terry actually have their own start-up software company together in Silicon Valley that's going fairly well. The government has mostly left all of the psychics alone....

For now.

MUAHHHAHAHAH cough cough sorry

Basically that leaves me room to write a sequel if I want to. IF I WANT TO. For now I'm going to BASK IN THE GLORY of having finished this story!!!
AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

Thank you, EVERYONE, for sticking with me through this ROLLER COASTER OF EMOTION. I am so proud of how this turned out, of how I've guided the characters, of how the story ended. And I'm glad you've all enjoyed it, too. I hope, of course, that you'll leave me parting comments <3 And if you came to this story anew and read it as a finished product - thank you! PLEASE tell me what you think!!!! Honestly, if I keep getting interest, I'm essentially morally obligated to write a sequel, which is what I feel we all want. So, there's your incentive.

Also, when it comes to the "other povs" deleted scene fic, I really just need requests for that, you know? Because at this point I don't even know what would be good to write for that.

Thank you everyone, for sticking with me, for believing in me, and helping me. I'm glad you enjoyed this ride through Jane and Mike's life as much as I have. I love you all, and have a wonderful, blessed day :)